

## I Was Screaming Your Name Through The Radio

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/22133044) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/22133044>.

Rating:	<a href="#">Mature</a>
Archive Warning:	<a href="#">No Archive Warnings Apply</a>
Category:	<a href="#">M/M</a>
Fandom:	<a href="#">文豪ストレイドッグス   Bungou Stray Dogs</a>
Relationship:	<a href="#">Dazai Osamu/Nakahara Chuuya (Bungou Stray Dogs)</a>
Characters:	<a href="#">Nakahara Chuuya (Bungou Stray Dogs)</a> , <a href="#">Dazai Osamu (Bungou Stray Dogs)</a> , <a href="#">Mori Ougai (Bungou Stray Dogs)</a> , <a href="#">Ozaki Kouyou (Bungou Stray Dogs)</a> , <a href="#">Tachihara Michizou (Bungou Stray Dogs)</a> , <a href="#">Nakajima Atsushi (Bungou Stray Dogs)</a> , <a href="#">Akutagawa Ryuunosuke (Bungou Stray Dogs)</a> , <a href="#">Kunikida Doppo (Bungou Stray Dogs)</a> , <a href="#">Oda Sakunosuke (Bungou Stray Dogs)</a> , <a href="#">Kajii Motojirou (Bungou Stray Dogs)</a> , <a href="#">Taneda Santouka (Bungou Stray Dogs)</a> , <a href="#">Izumi Kyoka (Bungou Stray Dogs)</a> , <a href="#">Lucy Maud Montgomery (Bungou Stray Dogs)</a> , <a href="#">Elise (Bungou Stray Dogs)</a>
Additional Tags:	<a href="#">Alternate Universe - Modern Setting</a> , <a href="#">Alternate Universe - No Powers</a> , <a href="#">Musician!Chuuya</a> , <a href="#">Musician!Dazai</a> , <a href="#">Slow Burn</a> , <a href="#">Literal Sleeping Together</a> , <a href="#">Mutual Pining</a> , <a href="#">Implied/Referenced Drug Addiction</a> , <a href="#">Minor Character Death</a> , <a href="#">unresolved childhood trauma</a> , <a href="#">Implied/Referenced Child Abuse</a> , <a href="#">Depersonalization</a> , <a href="#">Enemies to Musical Duo to Even Worse Enemies to Lovers</a> , <a href="#">Implied/Referenced Suicide attempt</a> , <a href="#">Implied/Referenced Overdose</a> , <a href="#">like i guess there's teenage drinking but there's teenage murder in canon</a> , <a href="#">Angst with a Happy Ending</a> , <a href="#">Slowest Burn is a more accurate tag tbh</a>
Language:	<a href="#">English</a>
Collections:	<a href="#">Bungou Stray Fics</a> , <a href="#">my all time favorites!</a> , <a href="#">bungou stray dogs</a> , <a href="#">iconic - high chance of tears</a> , <a href="#">Pastels fics</a> , <a href="#">Hanya Fic yang Aku Sukai</a> , <a href="#">SOUKOKU !!!!! *SCREAMS*</a> , <a href="#">i'm in love with these fics</a> , <a href="#">the landscape of my heart</a> , <a href="#">I'm not Allowed to Make Comments on Ongoing Port Mafia Record's Legal Disputes.. BUT</a> , <a href="#">Soukoku for the Soul</a> , <a href="#">RANDOM_FANDOM</a> , <a href="#">FICS WITH THE BEST CONCEPTS</a> , <a href="#">For Later Marks</a> , <a href="#">BSD_fics_worth_of_adoration</a> , <a href="#">Bungo Stray Dogs Favorites</a> , <a href="#">completed bsd fics that give me life</a> , <a href="#">i really really like soukoku</a> , <a href="#">BSD fics that I reread again and again</a> , <a href="#">cabinets favorites</a> , <a href="#">Will's Special Recommendations (also known as the GOAT)</a> , <a href="#">BSD4568260</a> , <a href="#">SOUKOKU❤</a> , <a href="#">jacks fave fics</a> , <a href="#">❀리 아❀'s library</a> , <a href="#">shinjuu</a> , <a href="#">call 911 for I have died at the sheer perfection that are these fics</a> , <a href="#">bsd library</a> , <a href="#">I Was Screaming These Fics Through The Radio</a> , <a href="#">blue's collection of fics</a> , <a href="#">То что нравится</a> , <a href="#">Soukoku *chefs kiss*</a> , <a href="#">fics that hit different</a> , <a href="#">my absolute favourite bsd fics &lt;3</a> , <a href="#">omg!</a> , <a href="#">Why...(°□°)!</a> (pages and pages of google docs links) (°_°)❀, <a href="#">Soukoku Is Life</a> , <a href="#">Best Music Fics</a>
Stats:	Published: 2020-01-05 Completed: 2020-12-05 Words: 256,709 Chapters: 10/10



# I Was Screaming Your Name Through The Radio

by [ElectricSplatter](#)

## Summary

“Four months from now will be the seven year anniversary of when you and Osamu Dazai released your hugely successful first and only album Double Black and its diamond single Corruption. After performing with Dazai earlier this year, are you planning anything special to celebrate?”

“Corruption is insanely overrated, and I would prefer to never hear Dazai’s voice for the rest of my fucking life.”

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[\[Russian Translation\]](#)

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[\[Vietnamese Translation-Wordpress\]](#)

## Notes

title borrowed (stolen) from Narrow by Mayday Parade

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

- Translation into Français available: [Je Criaïs Ton Nom A Travers La Radio \(Traduction Française\)](#) by [S3r3na\\_b](#)
- Translation into Українська available: [я кричав твоє ім'я по радіо](#) by [mrzmzy](#)

# A Song That Starts In Two Places

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

### September, Six Years & Eight Months Since the Release of Corruption

It's not even a particularly important interview, it's a short live one for a stupid online magazine. They're streaming it to their site. It's only supposed to be a couple light questions about Chuuya's upcoming musical plans. It's going well enough until the last question.

"Four months from now will be the seven year anniversary of when you and Osamu Dazai released your hugely successful first and only album Double Black and its diamond single *Corruption*. After performing with Dazai earlier this year, are you planning anything special to celebrate?"

People have asked him about Dazai a million times before. Every single time he's given the correct response, that he's not allowed to comment on ongoing Port Mafia Records legal disputes. It's the answer he'd given when Dazai leaving had still been fresh, when he'd been so angry he'd had to practically force the words out.

But this time the expected answer doesn't come out. Instead he can still see the bastard's mocking smirk from a little over a month ago, still hear his perfectly chosen taunts that had gotten far deeper under his skin than he wanted to admit.

So instead Chuuya tells the truth. "*Corruption* is insanely overrated, and I would prefer to never hear Dazai's voice for the rest of my fucking life."

Needless to say, the interview goes viral almost instantly.

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### August, One Year & Five Months Until the Release of Corruption

Dazai doesn't know what he's doing here. He's sitting alone at a booth towards the back of the room, but not far enough that he can't see the stage clearly. He just wants to avoid all the bodies crowding the stage and making fools of themselves. It's a small crowd, but they're extremely rowdy.

*Teenagers*, he scoffs internally.

He's only fifteen, but he'd never act like that. Dazai had arrived an hour ago and ordered the first thing he saw on the menu so his waiter would leave him alone. The untouched plate is sitting in front of him, he moves it around a little to make it look like he's eating. He's slowly nursing a cup of coffee and wishing he could just leave already.

Dazai has listened to a lot of terrible music since signing on with Port Mafia Records a year ago, but The Sheep are some of the worst. They've stumbled into having a semi-popular pop

song playing on local radio stations, and have let this minor success go to their juvenile heads. They march around the stage like they're more than children playing dress up and at being competent musicians.

It's almost cute, how they throw on leather jackets and heavy makeup like that makes them dark and mature. Dazai bets he's seen more than any of them in a week with PMR. Yet they parade around the small stage in the middle of the restaurant and greet their audience with smirks.

It's not so much the arrogance that puts Dazai off, he's used to that being surround by aspiring artists every day. It's that not a single member of The Sheep has any genuine talent between the five of them. He's read the file on all of them left by Mori when he was assigned this job, and he can't figure out why the boss is wasting his time with this group. They're coasting by on being attractive enough for their age and adolescent charm.

Their lead singer Shirase is barely passable at the simple melodies he attempts while flipping his silver hair. The lead guitarist is a cute girl with pink hair named Yuan that is focused so hard on not messing up she's practically trembling with nerves. The redheaded keyboard player Chuuya plunks his way clumsily through the numbers. The bass player Akira is actually decent but in a dull, predictable way. The drummer Shougo only manages to keep the beat ninety percent of the time.

Overall, none of them are worth scouting as solo artists and Dazai doubts Mori is interested in signing them as a band. Dazai hates half the bands at PMR, but this would be a new low. They're above this level of mediocrity.

The rest of the customers in the restaurant are idiots who don't share his sentiments if their shrieking is anything to go by. They clap and cheer after every number, and the people harming their ears standing by the stage sing along to the insult to music.

He sighs as the band finishes a truly offensive number titled *Life's Better With a Little Party In It* (the name alone is enough to annoy him) and checks his phone. The band should be wrapping up soon. He flips through a couple texts with updates on projects he's working on.

He hasn't been working with Port Mafia Records long enough yet to get any real challenges or music worth putting much effort into. He's only been on a couple scouting jobs, and the artists those times had been palatable at least. He would have begged this one off on someone else if Mori himself hadn't given it to him. He personally thinks Mori is despicable, but Dazai won't get far in Port Mafia Records without his approval.

If Mori thinks Dazai is the right person for this job because of his age he's mistaken. Dazai finds most people his age stupid, boring, or both. He certainly doesn't share musical tastes with them.

"Thank you, everyone, you're too kind." The voice of the lead singer pulls Dazai's attention back to the stage. Shirase is smiling at the audience in a way that they probably can't tell is fake. "We've just got time for a couple more songs tonight."

“*Golden Demon*,” someone calls out from the crowd. It’s a girl’s voice, somewhere close to the stage. It brings a smile to Dazai’s face for the first time since the band started playing.

Shirase’s face, meanwhile, drops the phony smile. “The Sheep don’t take requests. And we especially don’t play songs by Port Mafia Records bitches.”

That’s the other thing about this job that doesn’t make sense to Dazai. Port Mafia Records has a reputation, it doesn’t try to hide it. It was just as famous for shady deals with radio stations and concert venues as it was for the music it produced. Wild rumors about drugs and other illegal business surrounded the company (most of which are obviously true). The Sheep have made their dislike for PMR vocal, so scouting them seems like a waste of time even if they were talented.

Kouyou Ozaki is one of PMR’s artists from before Mori took over as the boss. She’s a powerful singer. Anything she sings is going to be butchered by The Sheep, and *Golden Demon* is her latest song. It plays on the radio ten times more than The Sheep’s little song.

“Come on, Shirase,” says the keyboard player, Chuuya. He stands up and plucks one of the microphones from the guitarist and brings it in front of him. Dazai is stuck by how short he is, he hadn’t noticed when he was sitting behind his keyboard. He seems to notice the tense atmosphere of the room after Shirase’s comment and keeps his voice light and smile wide. “We’ve got the time, and *Golden Demon* is good enough we can ignore it comes from PMR. Plus, how can we ignore a request from such a lovely young fan?”

He lays it on thick by winking at the girl who shouted. There’s a release of tension in the air. Shirase fights off a scowl. The other band members seem torn between the two boys, but stay silent.

Dazai is entertained for the first time this evening. So they aren’t the happy little family of teenage rebels they pretend to be. Fascinating.

Chuuya and Shirase exchange a couple heated whispers but Chuuya seems to win because Shirase backs off and takes a seat on his stool with obvious discontent. The guitar player gives Chuuya an encouraging smile while the other two adjust their instruments for the number.

Dazai realizes that Shirase is sitting out for the number and is a little impressed by the singer’s pettiness. He’s really leaving his band out to dry on a song way too advanced for them because of selfish reasons. Maybe he would be a good fit at PMR after all.

Dazai is surprised when Chuuya keeps the microphone and adjusts it so it faces him. He doesn’t envy the boy. He can barely keep up with Kouyou, and he’s actually practiced with her.

Chuuya fiddles with his keys in a short tune. He flashes another big smile as if he hadn’t just had a heated argument with his lead singer that they all witnessed. “We’ll give it our best shot. Here’s *Golden Demon*.”

He begins to play the opening chords with a confidence that was missing from any earlier songs. His fingers glide from key to key easily, and the sound comes out smoothly. He plays it at a slightly slower tempo than Kouyou's version, the notes softer and more melancholic.

*Congratulations on your engagement*

*Everyone says that it's a smart match*

*You've traded your heart for quite a sum*

*I hope you're satisfied with your catch*

Chuuya sings the first verse just like he plays the piano, soft and smooth and with a heavy sense of sadness. He draws out the words expertly, with a clear voice that drowns out the imperfections of the other band members. It isn't the powerful, angry ballad that Kouyou sings, it's a painfully earnest version.

The noise that was present during the other the numbers has hushed as Chuuya continues the song with the same level of skill. The wait staff is paused as well, taking in the music with a sort of reverence.

Dazai realizes he's frozen with his coffee midway to his mouth staring at the keyboard player. He can feel the raised hairs on his arms. He quickly sets down the mug and schools his expression into something more neutral.

He listens to the rest of *Golden Demon* raptly. Chuuya never falters, not at the range of the chorus, or when his guitar player gets lost in the middle of the bridge. He keeps singing and playing as if he's the only one on stage.

It's not a perfect rendition, he's a bit pitchy on the high notes. Dazai can't help being impressed at the raw talent though. He can't remember the last time he heard someone so musically gifted just playing a song they liked with this level of expertise.

*Chuuya Nakahara*, he thinks to himself as the restaurant explodes into applause as the song comes to a close. *Where the hell did Mori find you?*

Dazai pays for his meal and slips out of the restaurant before the band can play anything else. He got what he came here for. He glances back as he walks out the door though. Shirase has taken over again, but he only has eyes for the short redhead back to playing music so crude it makes him sound unremarkable.

Dazai wonders how Mori is going to get him out from under The Sheep. He wonders why he ended up playing with people so far beneath him. He wonders when he's going to get a chance to meet him properly.

For the first time in his life, Dazai is excited to work on music with someone.

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## November, One Year & Two Months Until the Release of Corruption

There have been a lot of adjustments to his life since signing with Port Mafia Records, but Chuuya thinks the worst one is having to deal with fucking Osamu Dazai.

The smug bastard popped up constantly despite having his own projects to work on while Chuuya mostly does vocal training with Kouyou or Hirotsu. Yet Dazai was somehow always there, chiming in that he was still pitchy. Chuuya is ready to kill him.

He'd expected to hate working with PMR. He'd heard so much about their underhanded business and savageness while playing with The Sheep. It's surprising how well he fits in here after how his employment originally started.

He'd been forced into a recording contract with the threat of PMR buying out Gelhert Sound Services and dropping The Sheep after they'd finally gotten a record deal with GSS after months of hard work. The other members of the band had turned on him when they heard Port Mafia Records was interested in him as a solo artist. He can still hear Shirase accusing him of being a sellout, still feel the drop in his stomach that came with the words from one of his best friends.

The one to broker the deal had been, of course, Dazai, who had watched on smiling while Chuuya had watched the band who had become his family over the past years discard him. That alone was enough to make Chuuya hate the guy.

He'd been ready to hate Ogai Mori as well. The man's reputation made him sound like evil incarnate, a demon who didn't care about any of his acts as long as he was profiting. Then Chuuya had met the man.

Mori had been refreshingly honest with him, never pretending that he hadn't tricked Chuuya into being here. Chuuya had been taken aback. He struggled to keep up as Mori casually commented Chuuya was the most gifted singer he'd met in recent years and with a bit of training had real potential. Chuuya had stumbled through a thank you while Mori moved on to his plans for Chuuya as an artist with PMR.

He's not expected to put out any music right away, rather he's supposed to learn more about the business while he trains his voice into recording shape. Chuuya just nodded as he was assigned to work under Kouyou Ozaki, *grammy-nominated Kouyou Ozaki*, and tried not to look like the overwhelmed fifteen year old he was.

The conversation had changed yet again while Elise had charged into the room. She'd come straight up to Chuuya, declaring that she loved The Sheep, him in particular, and gosh his hair was pretty. Chuuya noticed Mori's allowance of the interruption and open look of adoration towards the girl and quickly slipped into his most charming smile.

Mori dismissed him after he promised to sing for Elise soon. But before Chuuya left Mori *casually* mentioned he'd admired Chuuya's mother's music as well. He even had some of her old compositions lying around, he'd get around to searching for them.



Chuuya's throat had tightened as he forced out that he'd like that. He's never told a single person about his family, not even The Sheep. He preferred to keep it that way. He clamped his hands around his wrists to keep steady.

Mori ignored his obvious discomfort and went back to chatting with Elise about shopping for new outfits. Chuuya realized why Elise had seemed so familiar as he walked out, he'd seen her at a show at a small restaurant in L.A. a couple months ago, she'd been close to the stage and requested *Golden Demon*.

He couldn't help but smile and shake his head as he walked out of the room. Ogai Mori was not to be messed with. He'd been manipulated every single second of their meeting, and even before that, yet he couldn't help but respect the man.

That was two months ago, and he's only seen Mori in passing since. Every time he'd been sure to be as courteous as possible. Mori always kept that knowing smile on his face and informed him he was pleased with his progress. It kept Chuuya motivated to keep working hard.

Right now he's on his way to meet Kouyou. He adjusts his tie as moves through the PMR office. Kouyou had forced him to start dressing in suits instead of "delinquent nonsense." He misses his leather jackets. The suit jackets are much less comfortable.

Chuuya manages a speck of his old look with a leather choker. Dazai told him it looked like a dog collar, but Chuuya doesn't take fashion advice from losers who wrap themselves in bandages (for reasons Chuuya is still trying to figure out).

He arrives to the area of the building Kouyou unofficially dominates. The decor is more refined and all the people who work here keep their tones light and know better than to disturb the woman with the corner office.

He nods to a couple people as he approaches that office and raps on the door a few times. He hears a voice call him in and enters with a grin already on his face.

If the worst part of his new employer is Dazai, the best part is Kouyou.

"Chuuya," says Kouyou, as if she's surprised he's there and hadn't told him to be here at this exact time (being late was a mistake he made once that he's never going to repeat). She looks up from the papers she's reading to smile at him. "I was just finishing up. Why don't you pour us some tea?"

It's not a request. He nods anyway and crosses over to her outrageously expensive tea set and gets to work making two cups. Kouyou swears by tea as good for the vocal cords and makes Chuuya drink it constantly.

He sets one of the cups on Kouyou's desk and holds onto the other while he takes a seat in one of the plush chairs in front of the desk. He blows on it as he watches Kouyou make meticulous notes on documents that appear to have nothing to do with music.

Kouyou finishes her work and slides it into a folder easily. She calmly sips her scalding hot tea. “How’s your voice doing today?”

“It’s fine. I already ran through the morning warm ups.”

Kouyou nods, looking pleased. Chuuya had been intimidated the first time he’d been sent to Kouyou, figuring she’d see working with him as a waste of time. Instead she seemed to care about Chuuya as a person first and an artist second. Sure, she was sharp and god help you if you pissed her off. But she also took the time to really get to know Chuuya, to ask him questions and remember the answers.

Chuuya may respect Mori, but he cares about Kouyou. It hurt more to disappoint her as a person than as a mentor. He wants to be worthy of all the effort she’s put into making him a better singer.

“I had something new I wanted you to take a look at,” says Kouyou. She sifts through the papers on her desk to bring out a stack of sheet music. She flicks through the pile. “I could use another pair of eyes on the second verse. It’s not flowing.”

Chuuya takes the sheet music she hands him and steals a pen from the desk. He skims the beginning to get the feel of the song before focusing in on the section Kouyou wants him to look at.

He frowns at the page, he tends not to write down his own music. He prefers to hear things played out rather than read them. It just makes more sense to him. Kouyou is trying to strip him of this habit, but they haven’t made much progress. She says it’s fine for him but then other people won’t be able to play the song how he wants them to. He bites back his reply that he doesn’t write music for other people.

The door opening catches both of their attention. Kouyou is displeased at the lack of knocking, Chuuya is displeased at the person who walks in. Dark brown eyes meet his and Dazai smirks lazily as he enters the room.

“Kouyou! Sorry to interrupt,” says Dazai, not sounding sorry at all. He made his way to the desk and handed the folder in his hand to Kouyou. “Mori wanted me to drop this off for you. I didn’t know chibi would be here.” He directs his taunt at Chuuya and leans against the chair next to his.

“I am *fifteen*, I am *still growing*,” Chuuya snaps back immediately. He regrets it when Dazai’s smile just widens. He fights down the anger with a glance towards Kouyou. Normally he’d tell Dazai exactly where he could shove his childish games but he doesn’t want to lose his temper in front of Kouyou. She seems to be ignoring the two of them in favor of reading whatever Dazai handed her anyway.

“I’ve heard that anger can stunt your growth,” says Dazai. His tone is light and airy, but you can see the delight in his eyes. “You should work on that temper of yours, Chuuya. I don’t think you can afford to lose any inches.”

Chuuya takes a measured breath instead of punching him. He gives him the dirtiest look he can and goes back to studying the sheet music Kouyou gave him. He feels Dazai reading with him over his shoulder and continues to ignore him.

“This sequence of chords isn’t going to work,” says Dazai. He reaches over Chuuya to cross out a section with Chuuya’s pen that he hadn’t even felt him grab. Chuuya wants him to be wrong, but he isn’t.

That’s the most irritating thing about Dazai. For all his insults and nagging and posturing, he was a musical genius. And he was insufferable about it. He could read a piece of music once and pick out all the problems in detail, or recognize off notes when he heard them easily. He constantly told Chuuya he was pitchy, which means he probably *is*.

The songs Dazai worked on were musically perfect, from start to finish. But it was almost clinical, there was no deeper emotion or feeling to anything. It was beautiful in a cold, distant way. Chuuya couldn’t stand any of it.

“The real problem is the lyrics,” argues Chuuya. He takes the pen from Dazai and scribbles on the words that sound off to him. Dazai hums but doesn’t disagree. Chuuya squints as he tries to come up with better words. He can’t do it with just paper though. “Hey, Kouyou, can we take this to somewhere with a guitar or a piano? I want to sound it out.”

“I leave it in your small hands,” says Dazai brightly. He exits Chuuya’s personal space to stand up fully. He nods to Kouyou and waves obnoxiously to Chuuya as he skips out of the office.

Chuuya rolls his eyes at his retreating form and turns back to Kouyou. She’s watching him with a thoughtful look that makes him slightly uncomfortable. “I’ve been puzzling over the problem with that song all week. You two could be a lot more useful if you stopped all the theatrics and collaborated.”

“He starts it,” mutters Chuuya under his breath. He sees Kouyou narrow her eyes in disapproval and quickly speaks again. “Plus, like I could get anything done with shitty Dazai constantly putting down all my ideas and calling me an untalented beansprout.”

“Dazai knows you’re talented, Chuuya,” says Kouyou. She looks disappointed in him in a different way, one that instantly makes him feel smaller. She speaks as if she’s explaining something he should already know. “He’s the one who scouted you to sign with Port Mafia Records.”

Chuuya scrambles for what to say. He has to swallow hard before he can get the words out. “I thought Mori sent Elise to scout me.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Chuuya,” says Kouyou, shaking her head. “Mori might dote on the girl, but she’s only nine years old. He would never leave business decisions up to her. PMR would only sign pretty boy bands if she had her way. Mori only sends people whose opinions he trusts to find new acts.”

Chuuya tries to make sense of that. Dazai has belittled him in every single conversation he's ever had with him, from the moment they met while he was still part of The Sheep. He constantly mocked his height and went out of his way to bother Chuuya. Yet he was the one who *recruited* him?

Kouyou continues on as if he isn't having a personal crisis in front of her. "I was surprised when I read Dazai's report on you. I'd never seen him be so complementary of someone. He wrote that your version of *Golden Demon* was musically extraordinary and with a bit of work could outshine the original. He included strategies on how to get you to sign with PMR and recommended moving as quickly as possible. I've rarely seen him put so much effort into an assignment."

Kouyou states all of this matter of fact, and Chuuya has to work to keep his face somewhat neutral. On the inside he was reeling, Dazai thought his singing was *musically extraordinary*? He can't correlate the words with the Dazai he knows. Then he catches on to the rest of what Kouyou said.

"Please, like anyone could ever sing *Golden Demon* better than you could, Kouyou," he says, waving a hand dismissively. Kouyou's bright smile lets him know he said the right thing. She chooses not to comment on it though.

"Let's go work through the trouble with this verse then," she says, standing up and leading the way out of the room, knowing he'll follow. She takes them to a room a couple doors down that holds Kouyou's favorite work piano.

Chuuya half pays attention as they walk along. Kouyou has read Dazai's report, which means that it still must exist somewhere. Which means he can steal it. He's already got a handful of ideas where it could be.

Chuuya is going to hang it on his god damn wall...wait no, then Dazai might take it and destroy it.

He's going to have to make a million copies.

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## February, Eleven Months Until the Release of Corruption

The most annoying thing about Chuuya is that he keeps surprising Dazai (and there are plenty of annoying things about Chuuya). Ever since he'd opened his mouth and started singing *Golden Demon* with an irritating amount of skill and grace Dazai found himself constantly caught off guard by the small redhead.

Dazai had resolved to not underestimate the boy after that but it just kept happening. One day he'd walked in on him and Kouyou speaking conversational Japanese. He'd been horrified to learn that not only could Chuuya sing and play the piano, but he could also play the guitar and write music too.

Dazai's music was superior, of course, but Chuuya always managed to wring out more emotions from the song than Dazai would.

Dazai made sure to surprise Chuuya just as often. It wouldn't do for this whole business to be one-sided. The memory of Chuuya discovering Dazai could sing never failed to bring a smile to his face. He can still see the redhead's dumb open-mouthed stare. His voice had been so squeaky when he'd accused Dazai of keeping secrets.

Chuuya still spent most of his time with Kouyou though. Dazai isn't sure why Mori is keeping him on such a tight leash. Chuuya's voice had been a little rough around the edges when he'd started, but it wasn't anymore. He wasn't involving him in any major music projects, which Dazai thought was a waste.

Dazai, meanwhile, has more work than ever. He's given song after song to edit and make less terrible. He approves album covers and marketing strategies. His desk is an unending stack of tasks that keep him occupied if not bored out of his mind.

So Dazai has to get his entertainment when he can. That's why he's blowing off a meeting to beat Chuuya for the fifth time at the arcade fighting game they're playing.

Chuuya lets out a hilarious amount of swears as he watches his character die again. Dazai had barely had to taunt him into coming. He'd casually implied that Chuuya was too stupid to beat him and Chuuya had practically dragged him here.

"Fuck," says Chuuya again. He looks out of place in his suit among the other arcade customers. They both do. Everyone else is giving them a wide berth, which Dazai prefers.

"Nobody likes a sore loser, Chuuuuuya," gloats Dazai. He smirks at the fuming redhead. "What have I won again? You have to be my errand boy for the next month?"

"Shut the fuck up." Chuuya is glaring at the game, as if it's his fault for letting him down. The lights of the arcade glow on his skin, turning it as red as his hair.

"Unless Chuuya thinks he can beat me? I could use a slave for two months." Dazai holds up another set of quarters, already ready to beat Chuuya again.

"I won't be here in two months."

Dazai almost drops the quarters. He can't fight the automatic frown. Chuuya seems surprised that he didn't know.

"Kouyou's going on tour in Asia," says Chuuya. He shrugs. "She asked me to come with her."

Dazai vaguely recalls hearing about plans for setting up the tour. He hadn't been part of them, but he knew it was happening. It shouldn't be such a shock that she'd ask Chuuya to go with. Kouyou adored Chuuya.

But it was a shock. Chuuya was going to be gone for months. Dazai plays with the quarters in his hand absentmindedly. It didn't matter really. He could find new ways to amuse himself. He could-

"You could come with." Chuuya seems just as surprised at his own words as Dazai.

See? This is what he means. Despite all his efforts, Chuuya keeps doing things that Dazai doesn't expect.

It's *annoying*.

Dazai blinks quickly to try and process the offer. "Unlike you, I actually have work to do here," says Dazai, dismissing the idea easily. "I don't just follow Kouyou around like a lap dog."

"Tell Mori you want to experience a new side of the business," says Chuuya, ignoring Dazai's attempts to piss him off. He looks calculating and serious. It's not a look Dazai sees often. "You want to hear how music sounds in different arenas so you can account for it. You want to learn more about international markets so you can be more successful in generating sales for PMR overseas."

All of that sounds exactly like something Dazai would say, and exactly like something Mori would go for.

Dazai hums as if thinking it over. Chuuya is tense, watching him. He smirks at Chuuya. "Well, I suppose I could tag along, if Chuuya is going to miss me so much if I don't."

Chuuya scowls immediately. "Never mind, stay here and rot." He rolls his eyes and starts to walk away.

Dazai falls in step with him, slipping the quarters back in his pocket. "It makes sense that you need me to come, they don't let dogs fly unsupervised overseas-*ow!* Chuuya's elbows are so pointy!"

## Chapter End Notes

the lyrics from golden demon are based on what i could gather the plot of the book is via strategic googling

i will unfortunately continue to shove my original lyrics down your throat

i just love bsd and soukoku so much

i greatly admire people who have set update schedules because i am not one of them

# Let's Take This (Shit) Show On the Road 1

## Chapter Notes

ty for all the love on chapter one! :)

the number of chapters has been changed due to this chapter now being split and...poor counting

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

### **September, Six Years & Eight Months Since the Release of Corruption**

“You are not to retaliate.”

Dazai sighs, not bothering to look up from the game he’s playing on his phone. “I understand, Kunikida.” He keeps his tone flat.

“I’m serious, Dazai.” Kunikida yanks the phone from his hands and leans down so he’s extremely close. “Things with Port Mafia Records have been going relatively smoothly since that business with The Guild in August. We are not to put that in jeopardy, especially over some childish feud.”

Dazai wants to protest that the feud is actually a lot more nuanced than it appears just to see Kunikida’s response, but he resists the urge. “And I said I understand. It’s like you don’t trust me or something.”

“You have trouble seeing things rationally when it comes to PMR, Nakahara in particular.” Kunikida offers him the phone back, and Dazai takes it. He makes sure to give Kunikida an unimpressed look.

“I swear I’m not going to do anything.”

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### **Early March, Ten Months Until the Release of Corruption**

Chuuya knows he’s still fifteen, but he hadn’t actually thought anyone really cared about that. He stays in a dorm room by himself in one of the buildings PMR owns with little supervision. He’s free to do what he pleases for the most part. Sure, he spends most of his time at PMR, but he’s never had strict hours (other than when Kouyou wants him to be somewhere).

Which is why it’s kind of a fucking surprise that he’s been assigned a *tutor* to accompany him on tour. Well, it’s not a real teacher. It’s Hirotsu. But still.

“It wouldn’t look very good if Port Mafia Records supported truancy, Chuuya,” Mori had said innocently. As if Mori had ever mentioned school to him once in the six months he’s known him.

He’d been able to avoid it on the flight from L.A. to Singapore. Hirotsu had been content to silently read a book in his seat near the front of PMR’s plane. Chuuya had unfortunately ended up sitting next to Dazai. They’d alternated between arguing, sleeping, and playing an ever escalating game of truth or dare (which had really just been dare and after Dazai had almost ruined one of the bathrooms on the plane they had been separated for the rest of the flight).

Now that they’ve arrived and instead of sleeping like he desperately wants to he’s doing *math* in a hotel room while Hirotsu watches. Kouyou has gone on to do sound checks at the venue, and he doesn’t know the rest of the PMR team that’s come with them well. Dazai had disappeared when they’d arrived too, muttering something about finishing a song.

Chuuya hasn’t regularly gone to school since he was thirteen. His foster families had never really given a shit if he went as long as no one called them about it. Then after he’d started living alone school hadn’t exactly been a priority. The other members of The Sheep hadn’t been much for school either, they’d spent most of their time ditching so they could work on their music.

He’s far enough removed from The Sheep now to recognize that their music hadn’t been... well, it wasn’t anything to brag about. He hadn’t cared at the time. He was just excited to be playing. Chuuya misses the feeling of being on stage, of the energy that comes from playing music with your best friends.

He doesn’t like to think about Shirase and the others. He’s still furious with them for thinking he’d sell them out. He doesn’t want to miss them. But as usual, he doesn’t get what he wants.

Hirotsu makes a noise clearing his throat drawing Chuuya back to his worksheet (where the hell had they even gotten these?). Chuuya rolls his eyes but starts working on the problem again.

Chuuya is kind of grateful when Dazai interrupts him by flinging the door open so it smacks against the wall. He makes sure to look annoyed though. Hirotsu just raises a hand to his forehead and says nothing.

“There you are, chibi,” says Dazai. He enters the room and hops onto the desk Chuuya’s been working at. He glances down at Chuuya’s worksheet. He’s smiling widely. “Your answer to number four is wrong.”

“Get out,” says Chuuya. He tries to stab Dazai’s hand with his pencil, but Dazai dodges easily.

“This is going to be so boring if you have to study the whole time,” whines Dazai. “We’re supposed to be exploring the city.”



Dazai, infuriated, had gotten his GED when he was fourteen, and was spared from PMR going through the motions of taking care of its younger employees. He'd laughed in his face when he'd heard Chuuya was going to have lessons during the tour.

"You think I want to do this?" asks Chuuya. He gestures at the worksheet angrily, not caring if he offends Hirotsu. "It's a fucking waste of time."

"So just get your GED like I did." Dazai says it like it's easy. Freaking geniuses.

"I won't pass," snaps Chuuya. He's never been embarrassed to not have finished school before, but this whole experience is making him feel uncomfortable about it. It didn't really matter. You didn't need to know algebra to play music, but he hated looking...lesser.

"Sure you will." Dazai sounds confident, enough to make Chuuya pause and consider him. "I'll tutor you. I know you're not as dumb as you act."

"The hell you will." It was bad enough to have Dazai correct his pitch while singing. He glances over to see what Hirotsu thinks. He's watching the exchange with a mostly blank expression, but his lips are raised in a slight smile. It further resolves Chuuya's instinct that it's a bad idea.

"Let's make a bet then," says Dazai. He leans his chin on one of his fists, looking down at Chuuya with a smirk. Chuuya glares up at him, locking eyes with him.

Bets are serious business between them. When one of them offered a real challenge, the other had never backed down. And Chuuya wasn't going to start now.

"You're on," says Chuuya. Dazai nods in acknowledgment, pleased his offer was accepted. Chuuya hears Hirotsu sigh from behind them but ignores him. The old man had been content to be a spectator up until now, he doesn't get an opinion anymore.

The next two weeks of Chuuya's life are a daze of caffeine, hoards of rice and seafood, flashcards, Dazai's insults, Kouyou's first concerts, broken hotel furniture, and more songs about science than he ever wanted to know.

In the end, by the time they leave for the Philippines Chuuya has a GED and a headache. Hirotsu just looks happy to be done with the two of them when he presents it to him.

"You know," says the older man as he hands Chuuya's phone back to him with his test results, "If you really wanted to win the bet you could have failed the test on purpose."

"I...", Chuuya falters. He had thought of that, but it didn't feel right to fail just because he could. Dazai had spent sleepless nights (although that was common for him) taunting Chuuya into learning more than he ever had in years of school. Failing on purpose would have been like lying. Dazai might be a liar, but Chuuya isn't.

"Don't worry so much, Chuuya," says Hirotsu, smiling much more kindly than he had over the past couple weeks. "Get out of here so you stop adding any more damages to our hotel budget."

Chuuya huffs a laugh and waves over his shoulder. “Yeah, yeah, old geezer. I’ll see you later at the show tonight!”

Dazai is already waiting for him at the hotel’s doors.

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### **Late March, Ten Months Until the Release of Corruption**

It happens for the first time when they’re on the boat from the Philippines to Vietnam. It’s a night ferry, and the whole tour crew and most of their equipment takes up the majority of the ship. Chuuya has been shoved into a room with half a dozen beds that are all filled with PMR employees.

Kouyou had insisted they travel by boat, claiming it was more civilized than an airplane and by the time you accounted for putting everything on the plane, boarding, and everything else it wasn’t even that much slower. Chuuya thinks this is a load of crap, but he’s not about to start crossing Kouyou now. She’s scary enough back home when she’s getting enough sleep and they’re talking calmly over tea.

Chuuya doesn’t get to see Kouyou as often as he’d like, but he knows she’s going out of her way to spend time with him. He’s eaten breakfast with her multiple times. She’s taken him to witness all the steps involved in playing a live show of PMR caliber. They’ve sang together to help her warm up before some of her shows.

Now that he’s not studying like his life depends on it, he’s embarrassed how much he misses her. And her stupid tea.

He’d also been on an insane sleep schedule while he was studying that was basically no sleep followed by thirteen hours straight when he could manage it. Add jet lag to that and his body has been totally out of whack. When he crashes in his bunk on the boat it’s one of the first times it feels like his brain and the time zone have cooperated.

Which is why it’s jarring to be *kicked* awake a couple hours later. Chuuya automatically wants to hit whoever woke him up, even before his eyes adjust in the dark to see Dazai crouching next to his bed.

It’s hard to make out his expression in the dark. “You were mumbling in your sleep, sounded quite distressed,” Dazai whispers.

Chuuya cuts off the angry accusation he was going to give. He rubs his eyes to try and get his head straight.

He knows he has nightmares. He’s had them for years. With all the shit he’s been through, it’s kind of a given.

But it’s one thing to be gently shaken awake by Yuan lightly grabbing his shoulder. Her eyes had always looked at him with the right amount of sympathy that never edged into pity. She never asked what they were about either, just sat with him until he calmed down enough to try sleeping again.

Sometimes that wasn't an option, and they would listen to music until he exhausted himself into sleep. Shirase would play video games with him until the sun rose some nights. On rare occasions the whole band pulled all nighters just messing around on their instruments, never really trying to play anything.

This is different. Chuuya might spend more time with Dazai than anyone else does, but he doesn't actually know him. Dazai doesn't let him. And he sure as hell doesn't *trust* him. He doesn't trust him to not be an asshole about this either.

"Sorry if I woke you," he mutters. He doesn't look over at Dazai. Dazai has a way of seeing through all of Chuuya's excuses and faked confidence. Chuuya doesn't want that now.

Dazai hums quietly but doesn't say anything else.

They sit in silence for a while, but it becomes obvious that Dazai isn't going anywhere.

"Did you need something?" Chuuya keeps his voice quiet, but the question isn't kind.

"Do you?"

That catches Chuuya by surprise. He glances over at Dazai to find him still crouching in the same position. His face is easier to make out. His expression is carefully blank. But it isn't judging, it isn't mocking Chuuya or an offer of kindness.

Chuuya shakes his head and looks away again. "I'm fine. Go back to sleep, idiot."

"Then keep the thrashing to a minimum."

If anyone else had said that, Chuuya would have punched them. Instead he just nods slightly.

Dazai stands up and walks back towards his bed a few down from Chuuya. He doesn't look back, just moves through the darkness with ease.

Chuuya watches him until he's lying back down and out of sight. He sighs quietly and repositions himself, trying to get comfortable again.

He lies awake for a long time. He blames it on the stupid boat.

When they arrive on land again Chuuya tags along with Kouyou to a couple interviews. He's not avoiding Dazai, he's just not seeking him out. Neither of them speak any Vietnamese anyway, they'd need help to get around here. It makes sense to spend time with Kouyou while he can.

"Something bothering you, Chuuya?" Kouyou asks once the second reporter has left the room. One of Kouyou's assistants is prepping the next one, making sure the questions are PMR (aka Mori) approved. Another one is sliding two cups of honey vanilla chamomile tea in front of them.

Chuuya grabs one of the cups, blowing on it. He still can't drink it scalding hot. "Just a little tired. I didn't sleep well on the ship. Must have been the waves."

Kouyou starts laughing, more than her usual demur chuckle, but real, hard laughing. Chuuya turns to find her clutching her side and trying to stop.

“What?” he demands. He can feel his face getting more and more red.

“That tea was supposed to be for the reporter.” Kouyou barely gets the words out around her laughter.

Chuuya stutters and sets the tea down quickly, spilling some of it on his hand and burning himself. “Fuck,” he lets out automatically.

Both the assistants turn to look at him in a combination of horror and disapproval. The reporter tries to keep a neutral face, but his bewilderment is obvious. Kouyou laughs even harder, wiping a couple tears away.

It’s sometimes easy to forget Kouyou is only four years older than him. She holds herself with so much grace and maturity. But Chuuya would rather not be reminded of how close they are in age at the expense of his dignity.

Chuuya stands up awkwardly. “Uh, sorry,” he says inelegantly. He hovers in place, unsure what the next step is.

“I’ll fetch more tea.” The assistant who set the cups down darts out of the room. The woman glares at Chuuya as she leaves.

Chuuya feels slightly annoyed, it’s not like he did it on purpose. He’s pulled back into sitting by Kouyou tugging on his hand. She pulls him into the spot next to her though instead of across from her.

She’s schooled herself back into her serious persona. There’s still a hint of a smile on her face though as she greets the reporter with a bow. “Sorry about that. This is my protégé, Chuuya Nakahara. He’s got the best voice at Port Mafia Records, he also really loves tea.”

Chuuya smiles a little over the praise, but tries to appear at least slightly professional.

“A pleasure.” The reporter clearly doesn’t know what to make of them but offers Chuuya his hand to shake. Chuuya takes it and shakes it as firmly as he can.

“And when can we expect music from you, Mr. Nakahara?” the reporter asks.

“Oh, no time soon,” Kouyou answers before he can. Chuuya nods, although he’s been starting to wonder that himself. But he wasn’t going to argue with Kouyou in front of a reporter (or ideally ever). “Vietnam is absolutely beautiful. What area are you from?” asks Kouyou, steering the conversation away with her usual poise.

He settles in to listen to the interview silently, sipping his stolen tea. Fuck, he needs sleep.

He arrives to the hotel that night ready to crash. He grabs his room key from the front desk and rides the elevator up to the top floor. He’s not ready for the sight of someone in his room when he opens the door.

“Finally.” Dazai is sitting on one of the double beds, working on a laptop. He cuts off the sound of a drum beat playing from the speakers as Chuuya enters the room. “Are you done following Kouyou around? You haven’t even released any music yet, you don’t have to suck up to reporters.”

“Why the fuck are you in my room?” Chuuya doesn’t move from his spot near the door. Maybe he can turn around and get a new room.

“*Our* room. We slept in the same room often enough while I was attempting to get you to be less of a moron that they assumed we should share. Hirotsu said ‘I’d rather only get one room’s worth of damages.’ He’s quite the drama queen, isn’t he?”

“That’s hilarious coming from you,” says Chuuya. He surrenders and flops down onto the other bed, head facing Dazai. “What are you working on?”

“Nothing worth talking about.”

Chuuya thinks it’s funny that Dazai spends most of his time working on music when he’s never seen him even like a song. When he showed up to Kouyou’s shows he barely paid attention. It’s almost offensive, but Kouyou doesn’t care so Chuuya doesn’t say anything.

“Let’s go.” Dazai jumps off his (it wasn’t worth fighting at this point) bed and walks over to Chuuya’s. He offers Chuuya a hand to pull himself up.

Chuuya swats his hand away. “Go where? I’m exhausted, Dazai.”

“How? You’ve been sitting all day.” Dazai leans down to pout in his face. “We’re in a new country and we’ve barely been outside. Stop being lame.”

“Damn it, fine.” He sighs and pushes off the bed. Chuuya ignores Dazai’s satisfied look.

“I need food first. Coffee, too,” says Chuuya. He grabs his room key and suit jacket. Changing seems like too much work. “And none of your fucking shenanigans. I want to actually sleep tonight.”

“I swear, Chuuya.”

Dazai sounds completely sincere, which Chuuya doesn’t believe for a second. He lets himself be dragged out into the night though.

When they get back to the hotel two hours later, Chuuya no longer has his suit jacket or the lower half of his left pants leg. Dazai is lugging the humongous tapestry they’d been forced to buy after damaging it.

Chuuya is sticky, he has booze that wasn’t his all over him. Dazai won’t stop humming some Vietnamese song they’d heard that neither of them know the words to, and that doesn’t even make the top five reasons why Chuuya wants to punch him.

Hirotsu is sitting in the lobby when they walk in. His expression would appear blank to anyone who hadn’t spent the last few weeks getting very familiar with how he looks when he

disapproves. He looks between the two of them, and just raises a single eyebrow.

“Evening, Hirotsu.” Dazai sounds chipper. He drops the expensive piece of art at his bare feet (Chuuya hadn’t even noticed when he lost his shoes), smiling widely.

“Is there a reason the two of you haven’t been answering your phones?”

“Mine’s dead,” says Chuuya. He runs a hand through his greasy hair. Ugh, he needs a shower.

“Mine’s broken.” Dazai holds up what used to be his phone. Chuuya glares at him before turning back to Hirotsu. The man doesn’t seem surprised by anything.

“A new phone will be prepared for you by tomorrow morning.” Hirotsu stands up, his task completed. “Try not to break anything else before I see you next.”

“We won’t,” Chuuya says automatically.

“No promises,” says Dazai at the same time. Chuuya stomps on his foot, which has got to hurt because Chuuya wasn’t a dumbass and still is wearing shoes. Dazai lets out a yelp. He clutches his foot and pouts at Chuuya.

Chuuya ignores him in favor of grabbing the tapestry and starting to drag it towards the elevator.

“Hey, that’s mine,” protests Dazai. He limps after Chuuya. He’s faking, Chuuya hadn’t stomped that hard.

“I don’t want this piece of shit.” Chuuya hits the button for the top floor and slumps against the wall. He’d thought he was exhausted when they left, now he’s running on fumes. Trust Dazai to turn a night into a disaster with minimal effort.

“It is *not* a piece of shit,” says Dazai, still as energetic as ever. “I’m hanging it up in my office when we get back.”

“You don’t have an office.” Chuuya will shower, then is immediately going to bed. He doesn’t care what Dazai does.

“I actually do. It’s just stuffy and boring.” Chuuya looks over at him. He’s being serious. That figures, the bastard has an office but Chuuya has never seen him in it once.

They arrive at their floor and Dazai grabs the other end of the tapestry and starts pulling Chuuya along with him. Chuuya lets go as soon as they’re through the door of the hotel room.

He plugs his phone in, ignoring Dazai’s chattering behind him. Then he goes into the bathroom and strips off his disgusting clothes. After he’s clean and feels somewhat human again he walks back out to a dark room.

Chuuya stumbles to his bed and gets in. He can hear Dazai breathing evenly enough to be sleeping, and isn’t interested if he’s faking or not. He closes his eyes and burrows a little

further into the blankets.

Hirotsu had told him he had trouble sleeping in hotel rooms, that he didn't like to be away from his bed in L.A. Kouyou had said the same thing. Chuuya has spent the better part of the last couple years sleeping on couches or the floor, so he doesn't really mind. A bed was a bed. He falls asleep easily.

He wakes up to someone shaking his shoulder roughly. It's not fully dark out anymore, but the sun hasn't risen either. He squints open his eyes to see Dazai kneeling on his bed. His hair is messed up, so he had been sleeping. Chuuya notes he's still wearing the bandages, he'd always wondered if he slept in them. He's looking down at Chuuya with that careful blank expression of his again.

"Do you have nightmares every night?" he asks. He sounds more curious than concerned.

"Not usually." Chuuya forces himself into a sitting position so Dazai isn't looming over him. "You didn't have to wake me up."

Dazai shifts so he's sitting cross-legged on the bed. He's wearing an old black t-shirt and flannel pajama pants, it's the youngest Chuuya has even seen him look. It makes him easier to talk to somehow.

"I thought you'd be too tired for this." Dazai speaks quietly, even though it's just the two of them. "Would it help to talk about it?"

Chuuya noted the wording, not do you want to, but would it help. He pictures telling Dazai what he usually dreams about, and the thought brings a revolting sense of fear and panic.

"No," he says firmly. Dazai doesn't seem surprised, he just nods as if that was the answer he expected.

"I'm serious, you don't have to wake me up if you can sleep through it," says Chuuya. He runs a hand through his hair. "It doesn't make a difference."

"I don't mind." Dazai shrugs. Chuuya can tell now that he's just woken up too. He's less sharp, his words less polished.

"Whatever." Chuuya lays back down and rolls over so he's facing the wall instead of Dazai. He feels like he should be embarrassed. He probably will be in the morning. Right now he's too tired.

He's not too tired to whip around when he feels Dazai getting underneath the covers of his bed though. Dazai doesn't stop, adjusting the other pillow casually.

"What the fuck are you doing?" hisses Chuuya.

"Sleeping, chibi. It's too much work moving." Dazai meets Chuuya's eyes as he lays down facing him. "Plus, then I don't have to walk over here again if you start being noisy."

Chuuya debates arguing for half a second before deciding he's too tired. He lets out a sort of half grunt and turns back over. He falls back asleep almost instantly.

When he wakes up Dazai is already gone. He grabs his phone from the nightstand to see what time it is.

It's past ten, which is later than he usually sleeps. He has a bunch of unread messages. There's one from Kouyou asking if he's eaten already from 6AM. Hirotsu had texted an hour ago to tell him to take a car to the stadium by 3 today. The rest of texts are from an unknown number.

**[8:22am unknown number]: chuuyu~ hirotsu is a meanie and made me get a new number**

**[8:23am unknown number]: he also tried to return my tapestry but i stopped him**

**[8:23am unknown number]: :D**

**[9:15am unknown number]: short stuff daylight is wasting**

**[10:02am unknown number]: you're such a slow little doggie**

Chuuya rolls his eyes and quickly types out a reply.

**[10:16am Chuuya]: I think you have the wrong number**

**[10:16am Dickwad]: you're awake!**

**[10:16am Dickwad]: hurry up and get ready. I want mango cake <3**

Chuuya reads the messages but doesn't reply, already going to take a shower.

He was right, the embarrassment is here now. But the more he thinks about it, the weirder and less embarrassing it gets. Dazai hadn't played any of his usual tricks. He'd just done the bare minimum to stop Chuuya from being loud. It was more decent than Chuuya had known Dazai was capable of being.

He could still picture his eyes as they'd looked at him both times. Yuan's eyes had way more warmth, but they were always questioning. She had never asked, but Chuuya could tell that she had wanted to know. She just wanted Chuuya to want to tell her. Dazai hadn't seemed like he was interested in an explanation at all.

She'd offered to sleep next to him, many times. Chuuya had always told her no.

Chuuya gets dressed quickly after showering, back in a full suit with no rips or stains. He straps his choker on and fixes his hair. It's starting to get long, he should probably get it cut.

He expects Dazai to bring it up as he drags him to get dessert, or during the concert, or when they're back in their room at the end of the day and alone. He never does though. He's his



typical obnoxious self, flitting between personalities and insults easily. Chuuya insults him back and ignores him when possible.

Dazai is playing a game on his phone, laying diagonally across his bed when Chuuya comes out of the bathroom that night. He's still in his clothes from the day, sleeves rolled up to show his bandages. Chuuya had noticed the supply of them in the bathroom today, and the used ones in the trash can, but hadn't inspected them closely.

In the past he probably would have, but he doesn't want to mess with this weird version of a truce they have between them. If Dazai is willing to back off from Chuuya's nightmares, Chuuya can do the same for his freakish habits.

Chuuya climbs into his own bed, grabbing his own phone to set an alarm. He really did need to try to figure out a healthier sleep schedule if he didn't want his body to give out on him. He flicks through his email too, reading work updates.

He's aware of Dazai walking into the bathroom, carrying the clothes he sleeps in. Once he's closed the door Chuuya puts down his phone on the table in between their beds. He plugs it in to charge overnight and turns out the light on his side of the room. Dazai had left the room completely dark when he'd come out of the bathroom last night, but he wasn't as much of an asshole as Dazai was. He left the bedside lamp next to Dazai's bed on as he settled in for the night.

He keeps his eyes closed and breathing even when Dazai enters the room again. A minute later the other lamp is turned off. The room is quiet and completely dark, and Chuuya falls asleep not long after.

He wakes up to the sound of his alarm going off, having slept through the night without any interruptions. Chuuya feels deeply relieved, nightly interruptions wasn't something he wanted to get used to.

A pillow smacks him in the side of the head, ruining his good mood. "Chuuya, turn that infernal racket off."

Chuuya throws the pillow back as he taps his phone to silence it. Dazai catches it without looking and places it back on the bed. He's still in his pajamas, a laptop open in front of him. Chuuya can see the complex switches and dials on the screen used to edit music.

Chuuya sighs and stretches his arms over his head. "Breakfast?"

"I thought you were eating with Kouyou," answers Dazai. He doesn't look away from the computer, fiddling with the settings expertly.

"Oh. Right." She had said that yesterday after the show. He hadn't been aware Dazai was standing there when that happened. He shoots a text to Kouyou telling her he's awake and moves to get ready quickly.

Dazai hasn't moved by the time he's ready to leave. He hovers awkwardly before he goes. Chuuya doesn't know exactly what he wants to say, what he feels about the shift between

them over the past couple days. Part of him wants to thank him, but the idea of doing that is horrifying.

“Why are you standing there looking like an idiot?” asks Dazai, looking up from the computer. “Run along little doggie, before you piss off Kouyou.”

“Fuck off.” Screw that, Chuuya would rather die than ever thank him. He rolls his eyes and walks out of the room without looking back.

It becomes a familiar pattern between them. They act as if nothing has changed, but on the odd nights Chuuya has a nightmare, he’s woken up by Dazai never gently shaking him. They exchange few words, and Dazai doesn’t move back to his own bed. Chuuya gets used to sleeping with another body next to his.

So maybe they’re a *tiny* bit less terrible to each other, but that doesn’t mean they’re *friends*. Chuuya still thinks he’s insanely annoying and they argue in almost every conversation they have.

Chuuya is mostly struck by the fact that underneath all of his whining and posturing (like way deep down) Dazai sees and feels more than he lets on. It makes Chuuya pay closer attention, to try and catch other glimpses of it. Osamu Dazai is a puzzle that he’s going to figure out one day.

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## April 29, Nine Months Until the Release of Corruption

Chuuya turns 16 on a Wednesday in Beijing, China. He wakes up alone in his bed, after a full night’s sleep with no interruptions. It’s more of a birthday present than he’d expected.

Dazai is awake already, as usual. He has headphones on, working quietly on something. He doesn’t look up when Chuuya starts to move around.

Chuuya’s phone ringing stops him from leaving the bed. The default ringtone blares out, startling him. He only has that ringtone for one person, and the screen reads **Boss**.

Chuuya scrambles to pick up as quickly as possible. Dazai slips one of his headphones off and watches him with raised brows.

“Hello?” His voice catches slightly from sleep. He clears his throat as quietly as possible.

“Chuuya, I hope I’m not waking you,” says Mori. He sounds as bright and cheerful as ever. Mori had only spoken to Chuuya rarely when they were still in L.A. and he’d certainly never *called* him.

“Of course not, Boss,” says Chuuya, voice normal this time. Dazai’s expression sours at his words. He mimes puking and goes back to work. Chuuya flicks him off with his hand not holding the phone.

“I won’t take up too much of your time,” says Mori. The idea that Chuuya is the busy one in this situation is hilarious. “I just wanted to call to wish you a happy birthday. Sixteen, that’s a

big year.”

“Thank you, sir.” Chuuya doesn’t know whether to be flattered or freaked out.

“How is the tour going?”

“Everything’s great. I’m learning a lot,” says Chuuya. It’s mostly true. All the time he didn’t spend with Dazai was useful anyway.

“That’s wonderful to hear,” says Mori. “Perhaps we’ll revisit the issue of when you’ll start recording music when you return.”

Chuuya stalls for what to say to that but Mori speaks again first. “Ah, Chuuya, I’m going to have to cut this short. Elise just walked in.”

A girl’s voice could then be heard in the background. “Happy birthday, Chuuya! I miss you! Bring me a present!”

“Elise, it’s *his* birthday,” corrects Mori happily. “He’s the one who should be getting presents.”

“Thanks Elise,” says Chuuya, mostly meaning it. “I’ll be sure to bring you back something good.”

“Have a good rest of your day.” Mori says it more like a command and then hangs up before Chuuya can answer.

Chuuya stares down at the phone, shakes his head. This is already the weirdest birthday he’s ever had. Conversations with Mori always left him feeling off balance.

“You shouldn’t be so familiar with the boss,” says Dazai. He has both his headphones off now, hanging around his neck. He’s unexpectedly serious.

“I’m not familiar with the boss.” Chuuya brushes him off. He knows Dazai has a vendetta against Mori, but it’s none of his business.

“Chuuya.” Dazai’s tone makes him look over at him. “He’s not someone you want to be close to.”

Chuuya can’t deny that makes his insides twist a little. Kouyou has often alluded to the same thing, just as vaguely. “We’re not close. He called to wish me happy birthday.”

Dazai drops the serious expression immediately. His face goes from surprised to way too excited for Chuuya’s comfort. “It’s your birthday?”

This is exactly why Chuuya didn’t tell him. Or Kouyou. Or anyone. Mori knew because he knew everything about Chuuya. Maybe it would have been better to let Dazai think he and Mori were BFFs who talked on the phone every day.

“Don’t tell anyone.” Chuuya says it as a threat. He leans over to get in Dazai’s personal space, glaring as harshly as he can.

“I won’t. I promise.” Dazai holds his hands up in a gesture of innocence.

## Chapter End Notes

originally the tour chapter was not going to be two parts but then it got...long

(me researching how to help people who have nightmares: yeah, yeah, that's great but it's way too healthy. what would an emotionally repressed teenage boy do?)

does the route of this tour make sense? who knows?? did i look at a map of Asia an embarrassing amount of times while writing this? why, yes, yes i did

# Let's Take This (Shit) Show On the Road 2

## Chapter Summary

in which we earn the teen drinking tag

## Chapter Notes

this chapter, woof

remember when i split this into part 1 and 2 because it was so long? honey i did not know the storm that was coming

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

### **October, Six Years & Nine Months Since the Release of Corruption**

After a week and a half of good behavior, Dazai is finally allowed to leave the office and accompany Atsushi to an interview on a talk show. Kunikida still threatens him before he goes, going on and on about the ADA's image and focusing on music rather than drama and so many other boring things.

The interview goes fine, Atsushi is slowly but surely becoming more confident. He still hesitates to accept compliments and downplays his talent, but he's a far cry from the shy kid Dazai met seven months ago. He also handles questions about his rivalry with Akutagawa with ease, even showing a bolder and slightly cocky side while declaring his isn't scared of him.

Dazai practically snorts into his fruit infused water (that still just tastes like regular water, but costs more). He congratulates Atsushi on a job well done. They're on their way back to the ADA when a couple of press waiting outside the talk show's studio stop them.

It's clear they were intending to question Atsushi, but once they see Dazai they edge closer to him rather than his white haired protégé. They focus on Atsushi first, asking him light questions about his music and personal life. Then finally one of them is bold enough to ask the question they're all dying to report back on.

“Dazai, recently Chuuya Nakahara claimed that your joint single *Corruption* was overrated and that he never wanted to collaborate with you again. Do you have a response?” asks a blonde woman, expression almost comically serious. The whole group is tense, waiting for

his answer. He can see Atsushi trying to subtly shake his head no at him out of the corner of his eye.

Dazai has a lot of different things he could and would like to say. His first would be to correct the journalist that Chuuya had actually said he would prefer to never hear Dazai's voice for the rest of his fucking life, more for their reaction than anything else. He also wanted to say *no comment*, which would have the satisfactory result of pleasing Kunikida while also taunting Chuuya with his indifference.

But indifference didn't seem adequate enough when Dazai considers how things had gone the last time he'd seen the slug. So he goes for the jugular.

"I know how much *Corruption* means to so many people," says Dazai, speaking with a passion that journalists always eat up, placing a hand over his heart. He can practically feel the reporters' energy spiking as he talks. Atsushi gives up on being subtle and covers both of his eyes with his hands. "I was appalled to hear Chuuya try to diminish it like that. He's just bitter because any new music he puts out is always going to pale in comparison to *Corruption*. Chuuya Nakahara has peaked, and it's causing him to lash out. He doesn't know how to write real or true music anymore."

Honestly, Kunikida should know better by now.

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### **April 29, Nine Months Until the Release of Corruption**

"Chuuya, I am *very* disappointed in you," says Kouyou from her spot next to him at the table of his extravagant birthday dinner.

Naturally, Dazai had told everyone it was his birthday the second Chuuya had gone into the bathroom. By the time he'd showered and come out his phone had over twenty messages wishing him a happy birthday from various PMR employees. Dazai had left the room so Chuuya couldn't yell at him.

He'd endured a full day of being fussed over. It was driving him crazy. He'd never been one to celebrate his birthday. Holidays, birthdays, all of that stuff hadn't been part of his life in years. Even with The Sheep they'd never made a big deal of things. Chuuya had gotten half a six-pack of shitty wine coolers as a present last year, and honestly he'd counted it as a pretty great gift.

Kouyou didn't feel the same and had cancelled her entire evening to rent out a lavish restaurant for everyone on the tour crew to celebrate. The food was fantastic, the attention not so much.

Dazai had also been keeping his distance the whole day. He'd been mysteriously absent while Chuuya was dragged around. If someone had asked Chuuya what a day without Dazai would be like he would have answered peaceful, but instead he was just paranoid about what he was up to. He'd even sat on the opposite end of the room for dinner. Every time Chuuya tried to make eye contact Dazai conveniently looked away.

“I’m sorry, Kouyou,” repeats Chuuya for what felt like the hundredth time that day. “I’ve just never been much of a birthday person.”

“I don’t care about that.” Kouyou leans in so they won’t be overheard. “I’d rather have a more intimate celebration as well, but when you cancel all of your scheduled events for the day you aren’t given a lot of choices. So next time give me more of a heads up.”

Chuuya laughs under his breath. “Sure thing, Kouyou.”

“I’ll get you a real present once we get home,” she says, pulling back and taking a sip from her wine glass (that she is pointedly not letting Chuuya have any of).

“You really don’t have to get me anything,” he replies. He picks at the food in front of him, not really hungry after being treated to all kinds of food throughout the day.

“Nonsense,” Kouyou dismisses, flicking her hand. “I’d buy you a car if you knew how to drive.”

“Wasn’t high on my list of priorities,” says Chuuya, just managing not to roll his eyes. He was here to make music, he didn’t even have a learner’s permit.

“Well, perhaps it should have been,” says Kouyou, rather judgmentally.

“I’ve never seen you drive anywhere once.” Chuuya frowns at her, pointing his chopsticks in accusation.

“Yes, but I could if I needed to, it’s called self-sufficiency.” Kouyou tilts her head up, tone somewhere between confidence and arrogance (the Kouyou Ozaki sweet spot).

“I defer to your wisdom.” Normally Kouyou doesn’t let him get away with sarcasm, but either it being his birthday or her good mood gives him a free pass. She does give him a disapproving look though.

The rest of dinner passes eventually, with more food and toasts. Chuuya makes small talk with everyone around him, accepting birthday wishes and meaningless compliments easily. He wishes he could just go back to his room and be alone, listen to music or maybe beat Dazai in whatever new game the asshole was obsessed with this week. Either would be better than having to put on a show like this.

Chuuya is saying his (hopefully) last round of thank you’s and goodbyes to the girls who do Kouyou’s hair and makeup outside the restaurant when someone grabs his left arm and pulls him away in a tight grip. He isn’t surprised at all to find Dazai to be the one clutching his arm, fake smiling at the women.

“Sorry, ladies,” says Dazai, fake sweetness in his voice to match the smile, “I’m going to have to steal Chuuya away.”

Chuuya rolls his eyes but lets himself be dragged away, waving farewell behind him. The girls wave back, annoyingly charmed by Dazai’s act judging by their smiles and laughter.

“Let go of me,” demands Chuuya as they get farther away. He digs his heels into the sidewalk to force Dazai to stop. They’re standing at the end of the block the restaurant was on, with swarms of people moving all around them. He tugs his arm out of Dazai’s grip. “What do you want?”

“The pleasure of your company,” answers Dazai, pulling out his phone and typing out a message.

Chuuya almost snaps back *then where have you been all day*, but catches himself.

“Seriously, what do you want?” asks Chuuya again. “It’s been a long day, and I’m not in the mood for your shit.” He’s been annoyed at Dazai all day for making him go through all this birthday crap, and he’s even more annoyed with him for ditching him, which makes him annoyed at himself for caring.

“Stop being so nasty or I won’t give you your birthday present.” Dazai puts his phone away and turns to scan the area around them.

“*You* got me a present?” Chuuya says, disbelief clear on his face and in his voice. He hadn’t expected that.

“Well, not really,” admits Dazai. “You didn’t exactly give me a lot of time to work with, short stack.”

“Could you maybe not call me short on my actual birthday?” asks Chuuya, less hostile than he was before. He’s curious enough about what Dazai has come up with to go along with it.

“I just realized I’m never going to hear the glorious words *I’m fifteen, I’m still growing* come from your mouth again. I’m distraught,” says Dazai, doing a horrible imitation of what is supposed to be him with a high pitched voice. He punches Dazai in the arm for that.

“Temper, temper, chibi,” says Dazai, not bothered by the punch. He must spot whoever he was looking for because he starts waving someone towards them. “Now we can get to your gift.”

“You got me a person?” asks Chuuya, giving Dazai an unimpressed look.

A boy who looks slightly older than they are approaches them. He has dark red hair and is wearing a suit, although his tie is loose and his shirt is wrinkled and untucked. Chuuya doesn’t know many people their age who wear full suits, so he assumes he works for PMR. He looks slightly familiar, but Chuuya doesn’t think they’ve ever spoken before.

“How is it that you’re older than me, yet such an idiot?” asks Dazai as the other boy reaches them. “Chuuya, meet Michizou Tachihara. Tachihara, this is my dog, Chuuya.”

Chuuya punches him in the same arm even harder this time. Then he reaches out a hand to greet Tachihara, who watches the exchange with a nervous smile. “Chuuya Nakahara, nice to meet you.”



Tachihara doesn't hesitate to take the hand, smile becoming more relaxed. "Yeah, I've heard of you. You're that singer, Kouyou's boy."

"Tachihara is taking us to the bar," says Dazai. He presents the destination brightly, smiling more genuinely than he had at the hair and makeup ladies but just as annoyingly.

"We're not going to get into a bar," says Chuuya. "I'm only sixteen, and you're still fifteen. And how old are you anyway?" He directs the question to Tachihara.

"Eighteen," answers Tachihara. "Which is the legal drinking age in China, not that they're very strict about that here. Especially for Americans working for a large foreign record company."

Dazai waves a hand, gesturing *I told you so*. Chuuya rolls his eyes, but doesn't argue. Tachihara takes this in stride, starting to lead the way to whatever bar he and Dazai must have agreed on.

Chuuya and Dazai fall in step behind him. Chuuya catches hold of Dazai's wrist to keep him beside him, keeping his voice loud enough for Dazai to hear him over the busy street but low enough that Tachihara doesn't hear him. "How do you know this guy?"

"I don't really," answers Dazai, also keeping his voice down. "He works in the sound department. I just met him the other week."

"Why do we need him to get into the bar?" asks Chuuya, confused at Dazai wanting to bring someone with them. After considering it, Chuuya was sure Dazai could weasel his way into the bar without assistance. Chuuya had never witnessed him even have a friendly interaction with another PMR employee, let alone ask them to spend time with him outside of work.

"The problem is not getting into the bar," Dazai replies back, eyes full of amusement. "The problem is getting home from the bar while drunk and not able to speak any Mandarin. I mean, can you imagine calling Hirotsu to come pick us up?"

Chuuya could imagine it very well, and it was not a pretty image. "So, he speaks Mandarin?"

"He does indeed. He thinks he's our babysitter for the night, so let's allow him to continue thinking that."

They share a subtle smirk, but both look innocent when Tachihara turns back to them. "What are you two whispering about?"

"Chuuya was thanking me for such a thoughtful birthday present!" lies Dazai easily. Chuuya has to fight off a snort.

Tachihara either believes him or doesn't care enough to call him out. "It's just up here."

Tachihara gestures to a building that doesn't stick out from the others around it. Chuuya can't read the neon signs that spell out the places' names, although he does read the ones that say beer and spirits. He follows behind Tachihara and Dazai as they enter, music hitting his ears from the doorway, loud enough that you had to raise your voice to be heard.

Chuuya has been drunk plenty of times in his life. Drinking had been like a game with The Sheep, a thrilling way to prove they didn't follow the rules. But it had always involved buying from shady older guys Shirase know or Yuan swiping liquor that her parents wouldn't miss. They'd only drank in basements and back alleys, never out in public.

They'd certainly never gone to a bar. Chuuya isn't sure what he expected one would be like. His first impressions are loud, bright, and smoky. All around them people are smoking cigarettes, and the smell and feel irritates Chuuya's nose and throat right away. Kouyou would absolutely despise a place like this.

Still, it's exciting. There's a mix of people there. Some people a little older than them are playing pool and darts on the other side of the bar. Middle-aged men are gathered around the booths and tables, one of the major sources of the smoke. Clusters of girls are everywhere, crowding the bar, watching the darts games, near the bathrooms. It's not so full as to be uncomfortable, but there isn't a lot of space available.

Dazai takes the lead and brings them to an unoccupied high table near the entrance a little further from the action. Chuuya follows, looking around. He doesn't recognize the music or understand the lyrics, but he likes the flow of it at least. He's mostly used to having so many conversations going on around him that he can't understand at all after being on tour this long.

Tachihara is also looking around curiously, this must be his first time in a place like this too. Dazai is the only one who seems uninterested by their surroundings, but that was typical. He at least didn't look outright displeased at anything like he often did when they were out.

"I'll get us the first round," announces Tachihara, raising his voice a bit. Chuuya nods and smiles at him, Dazai just nods. Tachihara enters the mob of people to approach the bar.

"So what do you think, chibi?" asks Dazai, speaking up and leaning in to be heard. "Is it everything you'd dreamed it would be?"

Chuuya laughs a little, eyes going to all the bright lights that somehow didn't keep the place from being dim and all the people yelling and drinking. "It's certainly something."

Dazai's expression doesn't change, but Chuuya catches on that his answer wasn't what Dazai was looking for. Chuuya quickly adds, "It's ten times better than that stuffy fucking restaurant."

That brings more life to Dazai's eyes. "Chibi is so uncultured. That place was one of the top restaurants in the city."

"I know you hated it too," says Chuuya. Dazai doesn't deny it.

"I was surprised by Kouyou's choice. I would have thought she knew you better." Dazai looks faintly smug.

The implication that Dazai knows more about his preferences than Kouyou doesn't sit right with Chuuya. He jumps in to defend her. "She had to plan it at the last minute. It wasn't her

idea. I would have preferred to not have anything at all, but you ruined that when you opened your big fucking mouth.”

“I was wondering when you would bring that up,” says Dazai, not looking the least bit apologetic. “Although I don’t get why you were trying to hide it. Since when do you shy away from attention? You know, once you start releasing music you’re not going to have any privacy.”

“So you’re preparing me for that?” Chuuya scoffs.

“I saved you the headache you would get from dealing with Kouyou and Hirotsu once they found out you kept it from them,” says Dazai. It was an infuriatingly good point. Although Chuuya didn’t think that was why he did it.

He stops from arguing more when he notices Tachihara approaching.

“Here we go,” says Tachihara when he reaches them. He places the three glasses he’s balancing carefully in his hands onto the table. Chuuya thanks him as he takes one. Dazai stares into the glass he grabs with something like trepidation.

“I didn’t really understand the different types of beer they had, so I just got what the guy ahead of me ordered,” says Tachihara. He gestures the glass he picked up forward, and Chuuya clinks his glass against his.

“Cheers,” says Chuuya before taking his first sip. He’s never been much of a beer person. He wasn’t exaggerating when he thought shitty wine coolers were a good gift. He tries to be grateful though, even if the taste isn’t exactly pleasant.

“This is disgusting,” declares Dazai, having taken a large gulp of his own. He scrapes his tongue against his teeth dramatically.

“It’s local,” says Tachihara with a shrug. He takes a long drag from his own, evidently not bothered.

Chuuya watches Dazai take another much smaller drink and wince as it goes down. “Have you ever drank before?”

“Of course I have,” answers Dazai, voice confident and nothing indicating he’s lying. Chuuya isn’t quite sure if he believes him.

There’s a long pause while they all sip their drinks in silence.

“So Dazai says you work in the sound department,” says Chuuya to Tachihara, deciding to try to be friendly. It was the least he could do after dragging him here just to use him.

“Yeah, it’s something more to pass the time. I’m actually a drummer, but I’m in between projects right now. You can’t really play unless you’ve got a band with drumming. I was getting stir crazy in L.A. waiting for them to assign me to a group and this opportunity came up.” Tachihara shrugs. “I figured it would be a fun way to pass the time.”

Chuuya nods along, noticing Dazai's thoroughly unimpressed look. He kicks him, but it ends up bumping the whole table. The only drink that spills is Dazai's because it's still mostly full.

"Keep your tiny feet to yourself," whines Dazai. He wipes his now sticky hands on his suit jacket.

"So, uh, how long have you two known each other?" asks Tachihara, looking back and forth between them a little uneasily.

"Too fucking long," says Chuuya at the same time as Dazai says, "Seven months."

Tachihara just nods and takes another long drink from his glass. Chuuya does the same, figuring nursing the drink wasn't going to make it taste any better.

Tachihara and Chuuya try to make small talk about the places they've been to on tour, but it's awkward at best. Dazai just plays around with his glass, not even attempting to look like he's having a good time.

Tachihara offers to go get more drinks once his and Chuuya's are low, and Chuuya feels relieved as he walks away. Maybe they can leave after they finish their second drinks. That wouldn't be too rude, would it? Why the hell did older people like bars so much? Chuuya literally feels like he's been chain-smoking, and the music isn't even that good.

"This place is boring," says Dazai. And from Dazai's expression he knows Chuuya feels the same way. He leans forward on the table, eyes full of mischief. "Let's make it interesting."

"How?" Chuuya raises his eyebrows in a clear challenge.

Dazai scans the room. Then he lights up as he thinks of something. "How many drinks do you think I can swipe from other people before I get caught?"

Chuuya knows that it's a bad idea, but he can't deny that he'd like to see Dazai try. He takes a look around, biting his lip in consideration. "No more than three."

"We'll see about that," says Dazai. "But you have to keep up. Every drink I finish off, you do the same. And you have to keep Tachihara occupied."

"What? Why?" Chuuya scowls at Dazai even as he's already focusing on picking his first victims. "How am I supposed to do that?"

"I don't know, do your little talented musical lost puppy thing everyone at PMR seems to fall all over themselves for," says Dazai distractedly. "If you'll excuse me, I'm rather thirsty. I think I'll go get myself a drink."

Chuuya glares at him as he walks away, but quickly tries to clear his face as Tachihara gets back. He places down the glasses on the table.

"Where's Dazai?" asks Tachihara, luckily missing seeing him approaching a group of girls on their right.

“Bathroom,” lies Chuuya automatically. “Thanks.” He grabs a beer and tilts the glass towards Tachihara before taking a small sip. He’ll have to work to match Dazai without looking suspicious, which was probably the bastard’s plan.

“So drumming,” says Chuuya, watching Dazai gesture at the girls dramatically in an attempt at conversation. He barely avoids rolling his eyes. “How did you get into that?”

“My brother taught me,” says Tachihara, launching into a story that Chuuya half pays attention to.

Chuuya keeps Tachihara talking, asking about what kind of music he likes to play and his favorite artists. He likes him a lot more when he lists Kouyou as one of them. Out of the corner of his eye he watches Dazai skillfully swipe a drink from the girls he was talking to, raising it towards Chuuya before downing it.

Chuuya finishes his own glass, trying not to make a face at the taste. “Goes down easier all at once,” he says to Tachihara’s questioning look.

Chuuya pulls Dazai’s first unfinished beer in front of him, trying to appear casual. It’s actually fairly easy to talk to Tachihara now that they’re alone, he seems like a genuinely nice guy. Chuuya almost feels a little bad for messing with him. But it’s hard to keep feeling bad when he has to hide a snort into his glass as Dazai steals another drink from a couple after taking a picture for them. Fuck, he’s already having more fun than he’s had the entire day.

Chuuya ignores Dazai flashing him two fingers triumphantly. Chuuya tries to go slower drinking this beer, which is disgusting because it’s older and therefore warmer. “Sorry, what did you ask?”

“How you ended up working for PMR,” repeats Tachihara, louder this time, thinking Chuuya must not have heard him.

“I was scouted,” answers Chuuya flatly. His resentment has gone down slightly, but it definitely hadn’t disappeared. He brings the second beer Tachihara had bought for Dazai in front of him. “I used to play keyboard for a band called The Sheep.”

“No fucking way,” says Tachihara excitedly. “That local pop band? They just put out an album a couple months ago, right? Although I don’t think it did all that well outside of L.A.”

“Yeah, that one,” says Chuuya, kind of happy for the excuse to chug the third beer if it will get him out of this conversation. Dazai looks way too pleased with himself when the guy he’d taken it from was so drunk he was practically falling down. Honestly, Dazai had probably done that guy a favor.

Chuuya is debating being the one to go up to the bar to get another round. Dazai has approached a table of older men near the pool tables and darts. The group was definitely more alert than the other people Dazai had chosen. The men look annoyed as Dazai hovers near them. Chuuya stops his sentence telling Tachihara his plan when he realizes what Dazai is about to do.

“Four!” shouts Dazai, taking a beer directly in front of it’s clearly watching owner and chugging it. He holds up his other fist in victory.

“That doesn’t count!” Chuuya shouts back. He grabs Tachihara’s half-full glass and slams the rest of it. Tachihara sputters in shock.

“Whoopsie, sorry,” says Dazai loudly as the man he stole from gets into his face, screaming at him. He shoves a finger into Dazai’s chest, and Dazai’s smile just widens. He narrowly avoids the man’s fist as it comes towards his face.

Chuuya moves through the crowd quickly, leaping over the table blocking him from reaching Dazai and the guy who’s trying to punch him. Dazai is holding up his hands as if he’s innocent, still smiling as he dodges another punch. The man is getting louder as he yells at Dazai, and Chuuya doesn’t need to know the language to know what someone sounds like when he’s pissed.

“Hey, asshole,” says Chuuya, raising his voice as he slides in between Dazai and his would be attacker. Chuuya smiles too, his is more dangerous than bright though. He catches the other man off guard as he strikes out with a fast kick, hitting him dead on in the stomach.

The man clutches at where he struck him, looking up at Chuuya with a mixture of shock, anger, and pain. Chuuya doesn’t hold back his laughter, idiots who tried to talk with their fists never saw the first kick coming. Dazai slips away easily now that the man is distracted.

“Five!” yells Dazai as he grabs another glass from the edge of the pool table as he passes it.

“That doesn’t fucking count either!” Chuuya yells back even as he grabs the nearest glass and drains it. It’s something with some sort of vodka in it, and it goes down harshly. He stumbles to avoid the man who he kicked rushing at him.

“Sorry, I’ll be needing these.” Chuuya sees Dazai taking the darts from the people playing at the board nearest them, shoving them into the pockets of his suit. The dart players join the group of people yelling at them. Dazai blissfully ignores them too, now trying to pry the dart board they were using off the wall.

“Dazai!” Chuuya takes a hit to his left side, more annoying than painful. He winces and rubs the spot, lashing out with another kick more to buy time than trying to retaliate. “Time to go!”

“Just a second,” calls back Dazai, still trying to pull the dart board off the wall. It comes free with a loud crack. Dazai pulls it into his arms and then rushes towards the exit.

Chuuya immediately follows, pushing the man he was fighting away roughly so he has space to escape. He gives him a little wave over his shoulder as he goes. The man screams back at him, shaking his fist.

Chuuya catches up to Dazai as they’re passing Tachihara, who’s made his way over to the side of the bar they’re running away from. He’s looking at them with a gobsmacked expression, mouth hanging slightly open.

“We leave it to you, Tachihara,” says Dazai, smiling brightly at the older boy. He doesn’t pause at all, just keeps running towards the door.

“Thanks man,” yells Chuuya, twisting his head back as he runs, feeling a little sorry but mostly still high off the adrenaline and thrill. “Nice to meet you!”

They keep running even as they leave the bar, making it another two blocks before they stop. Both of them are breathing hard, Dazai drops the dart board he’d stolen at his feet, bending over to try and catch his breath.

“Fuck,” says Chuuya, shaking his head and running his hand through his hair. He hasn’t stopped smiling though. “Now how are we supposed to get back to the hotel?”

Dazai manages to get them a cab and direct them by showing them a picture of the hotel, though it takes a long time and a lot of gesturing. He thinks the cab driver is mostly questioning the clearly stolen dart board they shove into the back seat. Chuuya watches, still half smiling, the number of drinks he had catching up with him and making him feel sloppy and tired.

Chuuya isn’t all that surprised to see Hirotsu in the lobby of the hotel, a phone pressed to his ear. His eyes narrow when he spots them, waving them towards him with his hand not holding the phone.

“Thank you. I’m sorry,” says Hirotsu before he hangs up. He then gives them his full attention. “Why?” is all he says.

“You’re going to have to be more specific,” says Dazai. He’s leaning heavily on the dart board to prop himself up.

“You know what I’m asking,” says Hirotsu. He never raises his voice, but his tone grows much colder.

Chuuya jumps in to try and placate him. “It was all pretty harmless. I doubt they’ll be that mad after a generous donation from PMR.”

“That’s not the point.” Hirotsu rubs his forehead. “Your behavior is unbecoming of Port Mafia Records employees.” He looks down at the dart board with distaste. “Dazai, you already bought a \$7,500 tapestry on this tour. I don’t think your walls need anymore decoration.”

“This isn’t for me. It’s for *Chuuya*,” says Dazai. This is news to Chuuya. “It’s not every day a boy turns sixteen, Hirotsu.”

That softens Hirotsu up considerably, although not completely. “I still don’t see why you had to drag Michizou into this.”

“We needed someone who could speak Mandarin,” says Chuuya, now looking at what is apparently his dart board. It’s broken, not in English, and missing some of the darts. Chuuya supposes he could hang it in his bathroom.

Hirotsu turns to glare at Dazai then. “Dazai, you’ve been taking Mandarin lessons since you were a child. You’re practically *fluent*.”

“Ah, yes, I suppose I am,” says Dazai. He smiles back at Hirotsu and shrugs. “Must have slipped my mind.”

Chuuya can’t help it, he starts laughing so hard tears leak from his eyes. Dazai’s smile just gets bigger.

Hirotsu sighs loudly. “Just go to sleep, you two.”

They make their way up to their room, Chuuya still half laughing while Dazai carries his birthday present. Dazai props it up against the wall when they get in the room. Chuuya kicks off his shoes and suit jacket. Then he goes straight to the bed and collapses on top of it, tired from the long day and all the drinking.

He frowns as he feels Dazai flop onto the bed next to him, turning to look at him. “Why are you on my bed?”

“Actually, you’re on my bed,” points out Dazai.

Chuuya looks closer around the room, disgruntled when he realizes that Dazai is right. He sighs and starts to lift himself up off the bed, but Dazai’s hand clamps around his left forearm. He pulls him back down with a sort of half whine of protest. Chuuya doesn’t resist him, he hadn’t really even wanted to move anyway.

He settles back down on the bed, getting under the covers still in his clothes from the day. He pulls off his choker and puts it on the bedside table along with his phone. Once he’s finished he turns back to see Dazai already burrowed into the blankets on his side of the bed, but he’s still awake, watching Chuuya with droopy eyes.

“Your breath reeks,” says Dazai. He’s got his face half turned into the pillow. He wrinkles his nose.

“You smell just as bad,” counters Chuuya. “We both need a shower. All I can smell is those fucking cigarettes.”

“I’m too tired,” says Dazai. Chuuya agrees, not making any move to get out of bed either.

“I think you might have made an enemy of Tachihara,” muses Chuuya as he tries to get comfortable.

“He’s a *drummer*,” says Dazai, as if that was all the justification he needed.

“You’re such a snob,” says Chuuya, laughing a little.

“It’s called having taste,” says Dazai, mostly into his pillow.

“Why’d you take us to a bar?” asks Chuuya quietly. He turns over again to watch Dazai’s expression, but it gives away nothing other than exhaustion.



“Did you not have fun?” Dazai asks back, voice low.

“I didn’t say that.” It was fun, or rather it had become fun after they’d stopped pretending to enjoy it and made it actually interesting.

“Isn’t that what teenagers do?” mumbles Dazai. He has his eyes fully closed now. “Stop barking at me, Chuuya. I’m trying to sleep.”

Chuuya hides his smile by turning his head to face the other way. Overall, it’s one of the better birthdays he’s had.

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## **Late May, Eight Months Until the Release of Corruption**

It’s strange being in Japan. Chuuya had wondered if he would feel some kind of connection to the country, this is where his mom was born. It is nice to be back somewhere that he speaks the language, but other than that it still feels mostly foreign. Tokyo is beautiful and full of life, but Chuuya misses L.A., which is something he’d never thought before. He never used to think of it as home, just as a place he lived, but PMR has made it something else.

Mori has a lot of connections in Japan, and there’s a PMR office in Tokyo. It’s smaller than the L.A. one, but Chuuya still feels more at ease around the familiarity of the place. The people here are having the same sorts of discussions that he’s used to, the same scheduling issues, wardrobe meetings, and above all else talking about music.

If missing L.A. is odd, missing music is an ever weirder feeling. Chuuya has barely sang or played at all the past couple weeks. He hasn’t gotten the chance to work on others’ music like he had with Kouyou back in L.A. either. He’s jealous of Dazai, who was constantly working on one song or another. But he doesn’t exactly know how to go about asking if he could do the same. As far as he knows, his job is to try and absorb as much as he can about touring and the Asian music scene as he can. This had been exciting at first, but now that it had been a couple months he’s getting a little bored.

He’d been surprised to get an invitation to meet with the Head of Operations for PMR’s Southeast Asian division, Arthur Rimbaud. The email had been addressed to him alone. He’d asked Dazai if he’d met the man, but he said he hadn’t. Dazai had only said that he’d heard the man was eccentric (to which Chuuya had replied that he was a fucking hypocrite). The invitation had been short, only requesting his presence with no other details offered.

Chuuya isn’t sure what to expect when he walks into the office. He scans the room for a moment before he sees a man standing near the large window, looking out down at the city below. He looks strangely sad, and Chuuya feels almost wrong to barge in on a stranger looking so unguarded. But he had knocked before entering and been called in.

Arthur Rimbaud is tall, with long dark hair that reaches almost to his waist. He wears it loose and covering half his face. He’s dressed in a long grey trench coat, wrapped tightly around his body despite how warm the room is. He also wears a black hat with a red hatband, a silver chain hanging over the brim. Chuuya already feels too hot in his clothes, his suit jacket sticking to his back uncomfortably.

“Ah, Chuuya, thank you for coming.” Rimbaud turns to face him, the haunted look mostly disappearing but not completely. His voice is deeper than Chuuya thought it would be. He offers a hand for Chuuya to shake. “Arthur Rimbaud, pleased to meet you.”

“Likewise,” replies Chuuya, shaking the hand, fighting not to react by how freezing it is.

“Ah, yes, I apologize,” says Rimbaud, catching onto Chuuya’s flinch. “I’m afraid I’ve always suffered from poor circulation. I used to wear gloves, but it was deemed unprofessional.”

“It’s alright,” says Chuuya awkwardly. He shoves his own hands in his pockets to have something to do with them.

“Come, sit.” Rimbaud gestures to two large armchairs in front of the window he’d been standing in front of.

Chuuya takes the one closest to him, surprised to be seated there instead of at the man’s desk. He takes the cup of tea he’s offered, touched even though the other man probably has no idea it’s one of the flavors Chuuya likes.

“I bet you’re wondering why I asked you here,” says Rimbaud. He’s using his own cup of tea more as a hand warmer than a beverage.

“I was surprised to receive your invitation,” says Chuuya, aiming for politeness. He sips his own tea, relieved that it isn’t so hot that he burns his mouth.

“I was a bit conflicted about asking you to come,” says Rimbaud. He’s staring into his tea instead of looking at Chuuya, his face once again slipping into a grave expression. “I didn’t want to disturb you, but it felt wrong not to reach out.”

Chuuya frowns, more confused now than when he walked in. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t mean to be cryptic.” Rimbaud looks up from his tea. He smiles but doesn’t look any happier. “I just don’t know quite how to go about this. I never thought I’d get the chance to meet you in person.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Chuuya drops all attempts at being polite, now thoroughly weirded out.

“I gave up trying to track you down years ago,” says Rimbaud, not acknowledging Chuuya’s outburst at all. He makes eye contact with him now, his expression still intensely serious. “It seemed like a lost cause. I didn’t even notice when you signed with Port Mafia Records. Then you were pictured with Ozaki a few weeks ago. The name threw me off at first, made me doubt, but then when I dug deeper I found out that Chuuya Nakahara isn’t your real name.”

“Yes, *it is*.” Chuuya speaks each word violently. He slams his cup of tea down on the table, no longer concerned with respecting anything this man owns. “I even have documents proving it is.” He’s projecting anger, but there’s a real sense of terror and horror hiding behind it. He’s worked hard to keep these kinds of secrets buried, and he’d like to keep them that way.

“California foster care system case file A5158,” Rimbaud speaks as if he’s reading straight from the document. “Mother, deceased, suicide. Father, unknown. Left his last group home at age thirteen.”

“What the hell kind of game are you playing at?” Chuuya wishes his voice didn’t tremble so much as he speaks. He tries to sound threatening, but Rimbaud just looks more sad than anything.

“I’m playing no game.” Rimbaud holds up his hands in a gesture of innocence. It does nothing to calm Chuuya. “I merely wanted to meet you, talk to you. I used to work with your mother.”

“If that’s why you brought me here,” says Chuuya, not quite shouting but very close, “Then you should have fucking said that in your invitation and I would have fucking told you that I don’t want anything to do with her.” He’s half ready to walk out the door right now, but something is holding him back.

“Your parents might be dead, but there’s still-,” Rimbaud says before Chuuya cuts him off harshly.

“My father is *dead*?” he asks, voice strained. He balls his hands into his fists to try and stop the shaking. He kind of feels like he’s going to puke.

“You didn’t know?” Rimbaud seems shocked, then it morphs into a guilty expression. He seems at a loss for what to say.

Chuuya had always assumed that his dad was some deadbeat who’d never wanted him. It was a comfortable assumption, one that had allowed him to feel angry rather than abandoned. But he’d had this childish fantasy that his dad was looking for him, that he was an important figure who’d swoop into his life one day and fix all his problems. It was absolutely ridiculous, but it had been a kind of solace when life was going to shit. He was more sad to lose that than he was about the death of a man he’d never known.

“He passed a long time ago,” reveals Rimbaud eventually. “I wasn’t aware your mother hadn’t informed you. But, as I was saying, each of them have family still living that I could connect you with.”

“I already have a family,” says Chuuya immediately, voice sharp.

It wasn’t The Sheep who he pictured this time though. It was Kouyou, laughing so hard tears were running down her face over a cup of tea. It was Hirotsu’s small smile looking at his GED results. It was Tachihara, someone he’d never met saying *I’ve heard of you, you’re that singer*. It was dark eyes meeting his in the hours between night and day, offering nothing more than a reminder he wasn’t alone. He didn’t need a forced connection with people who’d never bothered to look for him his whole life.

“Of course, the decision is up to you,” says Rimbaud, not put off by Chuuya’s anger. “I know that your mother had her...troubles. I wish you could have gotten to know the other sides of her.”

“You think I don’t know that?” Chuuya laughs without any joy, the sound slightly manic. “Her “troubles” almost cost me my fucking life.”

“I’m sorry, this isn’t going at all how I wanted it too.” Rimbaud lifts a hand as if to reach out but seems to think better of it. “I was heartbroken when I read the news report of what had happened to you and your mom. I tried to reach out, but with all the privacy laws you have in America I wasn’t able to get anywhere.”

“You shouldn’t have bothered,” says Chuuya. He has enough of a grip on his emotions now to speak normally. He makes sure to give Rimbaud his coldest look. “I don’t want anything from you. Whatever debt you feel you owe me is nonexistent. I want you to *leave me alone*.”

“If that’s what you wish, I understand.” Rimbaud looks so torn up about it. If Chuuya were a better person he’d probably feel guilty. Instead he feels satisfied, glad that the other man was feeling a fraction of how shitty Chuuya felt.

“Whatever, man,” Chuuya picks up his tea and drains the rest in a long gulp. No use wasting good tea over an asshole. He puts the cup back on the plate more delicately this time. “You can fuck off.”

He stands up, adjusting his suit jacket which was now sweaty from how stupidly hot the room was. “Thanks for the tea.” He nods dismissively at Rimbaud and turns to go. He gets to the door before Rimbaud speaks again.

“Chuuya.” Something in his tone makes Chuuya turn around to look at him. He doesn’t look timid or sad anymore, but confident. “Before you go, I just want to say one thing. I know exactly what your mother told you about yourself, about Arahbaki. Do not believe her. You are *human*. You did not deserve what she did to you. Do what you want with your life. If that is music, so be it. I am impressed with the young man you’ve become, you have a spine of steel. Keep that. It was an honor to meet you, Chuuya Nakahara.” Rimbaud bows low to the ground.

Chuuya takes all that in, breathing tightly. He hates that the first question he wants to ask is *are you sure?* He can feel his eyes starting to water, but stubbornly refuses to let any tears fall. He clears his throat roughly. “It was an honor to meet you, Arthur Rimbaud.” He bows back, just as lowly.

After he stands up, he quickly exits the office, deeply shaken.

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## **Early June, Seven Months Until the Release of Corruption**

Chuuya tries to get out of the weird mood he’s been in ever since speaking to Arthur Rimbaud, but it’s difficult. He feels out of place, like he’s just playing the part of Chuuya Nakahara, Port Mafia Records employee. He’s worked so hard to push down all this shit from his past with his mom, and now it feels like he can’t escape it.

They’ve left Tokyo for Yokohama, and Chuuya’s spent the last couple days wondering the city by himself. He needs some time alone, to think without any of the way too observant

people he works with watching him. He's not sure who he's avoiding the most, Kouyou, Hirotsu, or Dazai. Any of them would be able to tell something was up instantly.

He's ended up wandering down to the docks, the ocean reminding him of L.A. in a way. It's strangely peaceful, even though there's people yelling and working all around him. He's sitting on the edge above the water, watching the scene before him. He doesn't stick out as he usually would, he's ditched his suit for a pair of jeans he'd found buried in the bottom of his clothes and a ratty old sweatshirt.

He props his head on one of his knees. It's been a long time since he felt this...*empty* is the only way he knows how to describe it. He's filled the last couple years of his life with constant energy and people. It had kept the feeling at bay. He wonders if other people ever felt like this, if they look in a mirror and wonder what kind of creature looks back. He hopes they don't. He wouldn't wish this on anyone.

"So this is where you've been disappearing to?" says a voice above him, startling him. He looks up to see Dazai. He's the most casually dressed he's ever seen him, also in jeans and a dark blue long sleeve. It's weird, like seeing a cartoon character in a different outfit.

"How the fuck did you find me?" asks Chuuya, no heat to his voice, not all that surprised.

"Tracked your phone," answers Dazai flatly, holding up his own phone.

Normally he'd probably yell at Dazai for not respecting his privacy, but he just nods and goes back to looking at the water. He can't find the energy to fight him, to ask what he wants, to fulfill his role in their stupid ongoing whatever the fuck this is. Just once, he wishes Dazai would believe him when he asks to be left alone.

Dazai sits down next to him, dangling his legs above the water. Chuuya expects him to say something, to mock his choice of location, to whine about Chuuya avoiding him, to try and pull him somewhere else "less boring". He doesn't do any of that though, he stays silent, looking carefree as he watches the water just as Chuuya had been.

Chuuya's not sure how much time passes. It feels long though. He stares at the water for the most part, trying to clear his mind of all the things that are making him stuck in this mood. Dazai's presence is somehow helpful, it was hard to feel like nothing when someone who knew you more than most others was watching.

Eventually Chuuya has to ask, voice rough after not talking for so long. "Why did you follow me?"

"Got bored," says Dazai, not reacting at all to Chuuya breaking the long silence. He turns away from the water to face him, face impassive.

"And you don't think this is boring?" asks Chuuya, smiling despite himself.

"No, I do," confirms Dazai without hesitation. "It's less boring than working though."

“Well, what did you want to do that’s not boring?” Chuuya stands up, reaching down a hand to pull Dazai up with him.

“We’re in Japan,” says Dazai quickly, as if Chuuya finally sprung the trap Dazai had been waiting for. “Let’s do karaoke!”

“*You* want to do karaoke? You don’t even like music,” says Chuuya.

“I don’t like *bad* music,” corrects Dazai. Chuuya rolls his eyes, apparently Dazai’s definition of bad music was practically everything in existence. “If we’re the ones singing it, it won’t be bad.”

That goes straight to Chuuya’s ego. No matter how many times he hears it, the fact that Dazai thinks he’s a good singer never fails to make him feel stupidly proud. “Lead the way then.”

He lets Dazai drag him to a karaoke spot a couple blocks away, renting a small room for the two of them. The place seems to cater more to tourists with the amount of signs they have in English. When asked how long he wanted it for, Dazai just handed them his PMR credit card and told them to keep charging it until they were ready to leave.

They go into their room. Chuuya settles into one of the chairs, letting Dazai hunch over the machine to pick the first song. This definitely wasn’t what he had imagined his day would be like, but he’s kind of excited. He hadn’t listened to music practically at all the past few days, let alone sang. It would be nice to do something he loves.

Dazai searches the selection for a couple minutes before letting out an excited noise. His grin is extremely wide as he looks up at Chuuya, which immediately puts him on edge.

“They have it!” Dazai taps his selection joyfully. “This is the greatest place I’ve ever been.”

“Have what?” Chuuya asks as the music begins.

It takes him a couple seconds, but he knows this song very, very well. He’d played it over and over again while they were writing it and then even more during practice and shows.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” says Chuuya as *Life’s Better With a Little Party In It* by *The Sheep* flashes on the screen. “No, no way. Turn it off!”

“*It’s a Friday*,” sings Dazai loudly, cheerfully ignoring Chuuya’s protests. “*And it’s been a hell of a week.*” It’s the most enthusiastic Chuuya has ever seen him about singing. He prances about the room, swaying in time to the upbeat music.

Dazai grabs the other microphone and shoves it in Chuuya’s face, dangling it back and forth. The offer is clear. “*Feels like I’ve been stuck in a losing streak.*”

Chuuya pushes Dazai’s hand away roughly, but that doesn’t seem to bother him as he continues to dance around happily.

*But tonight is the night we turn it around*

*There's not a thing that can keep me down*

Chuuya sighs, picking up the other microphone and giving in. Dazai's smile in response is huge. Chuuya rolls his eyes at him.

Singing along can't be worse than having Dazai sing it to him. Plus, just because it was a shit song didn't mean it wasn't fun. Chuuya had always had a blast playing it on stage. They sing together as the chorus starts.

*So turn down the lights, and turn up the music*

*Tell all your friends, tell everyone*

*Dance 'til your feet are covered in bruises*

*We'll keep going 'til we see the sun*

*Cuz life is better,*

*Life's just better,*

*Life is better, better, better*

*Life's better with a little party in it*

Chuuya doesn't plan it, his body just naturally starts to go through the motions it's been trained to. He stomps, slides, and shakes his fist to the beat of the chorus before he's realized what he's done. He desperately wishes that Dazai hasn't noticed, but the way he's paused singing along to the song crushes that hope.

"What was that?" Dazai asks, his face already creeping into a knowing smile.

"Nothing," says Chuuya quickly. He tries to keep his expression neutral.

"Chuuya," Dazai says his name, practically bouncing in excitement, "Did The Sheep create *choreography* for this song?"

"No," lies Chuuya, not sounding even a little bit believable to his own ears.

Dazai laughs loudly then, having to bend over with the force of it. His eyes are closed and he's shaking he's laughing so hard.

It strikes Chuuya oddly. He's seen Dazai laugh plenty of times, has been the reason for it most of the time. But it's never like this. There's usually a sense of control, that he's laughing at someone who's playing their part in his game. This isn't like that. It's, for lack of a better word, honest. Dazai has never looked more fifteen.

It's this oddness that makes Chuuya fight down his embarrassment to laugh a little himself. "Want me to teach it to you?"

Dazai straightens up instantly, cutting off his laughter. His eyes widen, face lit up. "Start it from the beginning!"

Chuuya loses count of how many times they repeat the song. They start it over and over again, until they both know the steps perfectly. Dazai mocks him the entire time. Chuuya insults Dazai's dancing just as much, calling him an awkward lanky noodle. The staff must hate them, but Chuuya can't find it in himself to care. He leaves a two hundred percent tip when they leave, figuring that more than makes up for it.

Dazai keeps humming the song even as they leave, somehow not sick of it yet. Chuuya ignores him, feeling strangely peaceful as he makes his way down the Yokohama streets. It's the first time since meeting with Arthur that he feels like himself again.

Oddly enough, his biggest takeaway from the day is that Dazai's voice and his had sounded unnaturally good together, even scream singing a terrible pop song.

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### **Mid June, Seven Months Until the Release of Corruption**

Despite being slightly homesick, Chuuya's kind of bummed tonight is the last concert. It's the final show in Seoul, South Korea. They were flying back to L.A. tomorrow.

He's going to miss being on tour, getting to explore new cities. He would miss having the chance to hear Kouyou go all out singing. He would miss spending time with Hirotsu, even if the old man claimed to not like it. He would miss the whole tour crew, the food, the late nights, the music.

Dazai interrupts his train of thought by sighing loudly. There were other things he was going to miss less.

"What's your problem?" asks Chuuya, knowing he'll keep sighing dramatically until he asks.

"It's the last night of the tour," whines Dazai. "And you never even performed at all. I thought I'd get to see chibi on stage at least once."

Chuuya frowns deeply. He'd kind of thought the same as well. But Kouyou hadn't been very receptive to the idea when he'd brought it up. At first he'd thought it was because she didn't think he was ready, now he couldn't tell why she was hesitating. It wasn't like Chuuya got nervous around crowds, he'd always loved performing. And even if he screwed up, it didn't really matter if he blew a single song as an opener in a foreign country.



He doesn't get why Dazai cares so much though. "Kouyou doesn't want me to," he says, shrugging as if he doesn't care.

"And since when do you need Kouyou's permission to do something?" asks Dazai. It feels like a challenge. "You always claim you're not a dog. Yet, here you are, allowing your master to command you to stay."

"Fuck off," says Chuuya harshly. "I'm not going to go against Kouyou just because you dare me to."

"Then do it for me, as a birthday present," says Dazai. He doesn't seem like he's joking. "Sing *Golden Demon*."

Chuuya had gotten Dazai's birthday out of Hirotsu the day after his own, when Hirotsu had tried to convince him to give back the dart board they'd stolen. Chuuya had convinced him that the dart board was already broken, they could buy the bar a new one, and to tell him the date after being annoying enough that Hirotsu had wanted to make him go away (and he'd accomplished all of that with a horrible hangover). He knew Dazai's birthday wasn't for a few more days, although he had been struggling to come up with what to do about it.

"You want me to sing for you as your present?" asks Chuuya smugly, never letting an opportunity to taunt Dazai go by.

The question has the extremely rare and extremely satisfying effect of Dazai looking flustered for a second. He quickly shakes it off though. "I want to see Kouyou's face when she realizes you stole her encore song from her on her last concert of the tour."

"Which is exactly why I wouldn't do that to Kouyou," says Chuuya. He's considering it though.

Chuuya doesn't like having debts. And over the course of this whole tour, he feels like Dazai has been doing him favors over and over again. The GED was an obvious one, the nightmare thing even more so. He'd taken him somewhere for his birthday. The karaoke thing that had pulled him out of his funk was probably unintentional but somehow the one that made him feel he owed him the most.

"Fine." Dazai rolls his eyes. He pulls out his phone and starts playing a game on it. "Scaredy dog." Chuuya can tell he's disappointed.

*Fuck it*, thinks Chuuya. Better to ask forgiveness than permission, wasn't that the saying? Deep down, he wanted to do it. He was getting sick of being a bystander in music. If it satisfied Dazai too, it was worth it. Kouyou would forgive him (he fucking hoped).

"If I'm going to do this," Chuuya starts to say, Dazai perking up immediately, "Fucking *if*, I'm going to need your help."

"Anything you need, chibi," promises Dazai. His smirk is both infuriating and making Chuuya excited. "Oh, this is going to be good."

Instead of spending the rest of their last day relaxing, they plot and scheme their way into getting Chuuya an opportunity to sneak on stage. It requires intense coordination. Chuuya wouldn't have been able to pull it off without Dazai, who was treating the whole thing like a life or death mission. Dazai somehow even gets Tachihara to believe his requests, who's despised him ever since Beijing (he'd luckily forgiven Chuuya, blaming Dazai for everything).

At the end of all their work, Chuuya is waiting just off stage on the right side, adjusting a microphone in his ear that Dazai had slipped him as they'd passed each other backstage. Dazai had winked at him as he'd done it.

Chuuya takes a deep breath. The crowd is still talking to each other, the many conversations creating a dull roar. He isn't nervous about singing, it's more about doing something this crazy. He wonders what tour would have been like if he hadn't asked Dazai to come with back in February. He's sure it wouldn't have been half as exciting.

He adjusts his hair and his suit one last time, then walks onto the stage. The crowd starts to quiet down as they notice him. He smiles widely at them, waving hello. "Good evening, South Korea. How are you guys doing tonight?"

The people who hadn't noticed him stop talking now that the sound of his voice carries speaking into the microphone. They cheer at the question. Chuuya smiles more genuinely, that seemed to work everywhere.

"My name is Chuuya Nakahara," he says as he makes his way over to the piano sitting at the front right of the stage. He'd always thought it looked nice to play, now he was going to find out. "Kouyou Ozaki is my mentor. I was wondering if I could play you guys a song while she gets ready?"

The audience lets out a somewhat lackluster cheer of support. Chuuya smothers a laugh, he hadn't expected much else. "Thanks guys. This is one you might have heard before, it's called *Golden Demon*."

The crowd doesn't know what to make of that. Some people actually sound upset.

Chuuya adjusts his hands at the piano, unbothered. He doesn't have a lot of time to overthink if he doesn't want to get pulled off stage. He looks over to where he usually sits on the side of the stage to watch Kouyou and sees Dazai standing there. For once, he's not looking at his phone or laptop. He's paying full attention to Chuuya. Chuuya can't make out his expression from here, but it gives him the push he needs to start playing.

People shut up as he hits the keys in the opening notes. He's always tried to convince Kouyou to do a version of *Golden Demon* of just her and a piano, but she preferred her version with a full band. Now Chuuya was testing his own theory that it would sound good. He sings the opening verse slowly, letting it flow with the piano.

*Congratulations on your engagement*

*Everyone says that it's a smart match*

*You've traded your heart for quite a sum*

*I hope you're satisfied with your catch*

After the first verse he shakes whatever nerves he had. He stops worrying about being caught and just plays and sings the song he's always loved, letting the music take over.

He sings the rest of the song, pouring his emotions into it the best he can. He screws up a couple notes during the second chorus (it's been a long time since he played the song), but he keeps going. By the end the room is extremely quiet, all he can hear is the last lingering notes he plays on the piano. He holds his breath a little as he waits for a reaction.

The applause that greets him is shocking with how loud it is. The crowd screams and cheers for him, and the sound echos in his ears harshly. He stands up from the piano with his mouth slightly open for a moment, caught up in the feeling. Then he can't fight the huge grin.

God, this is better than every performance he ever did with The Sheep. He feels invincible, and strangely at peace. The chaos of the arena matches him, makes him feel settled. This was what music was supposed to be like.

"Thank you, thank you," he says into the mic. He does a little bow. "You flatter me, seriously."

Chuuya straightens and glances to the side again to see Dazai clapping along with them, though the gesture is slightly mocking. It makes Chuuya smile even wider. He mouths *happy fucking birthday* at him.

"You're a great crowd," says Chuuya, moving away from the piano towards the center of the stage. "Thanks for letting me sing for you before getting to our main performer of the evening. Who's ready to hear the inimitable Kouyou Ozaki?"

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### **Late June, Seven Months Until the Release of Corruption**

Chuuya knocks on the door to Mori's office, trying to fight down the nerves he feels. They just returned from tour two days ago. He's mostly been sleeping and unpacking, and he hadn't planned to come into the office today until he'd gotten a text from Mori requesting his presence. Chuuya had never gotten ready so quickly in his life, he feels like he's been on edge ever since he read the message.

"Come in," calls Mori from inside the room. Chuuya pulls the door open and steps in, shutting it carefully behind him.

It feels distinctly different than walking into Rimbaud's office a little over a month ago. Arthur's office had been unbearably warm, but Mori's felt distinctly cold even though the

temperature was normal. The space was huge but sparsely furnished, Mori's large desk lording over the entire room. Chuuya rarely spent time here, and that was just fine with him.

"Chuuya," says Mori, looking up from the stack of papers on his desk with a wide smile. He beckons him to come forward. "Welcome back. I was planning to wait to have this discussion, but certain events have prompted me to adjust my schedule."

Chuuya notices a video pulled up on Mori's computer as he gets closer. It's him singing *Golden Demon* at Kouyou's concert, the view count much higher than he would have predicted.

He swallows roughly. He's already apologized to Kouyou over and over again, but he can't tell if she's forgiven him or not. She's been colder towards him since the concert. It's subtle, but it makes Chuuya want to smash something. He's more pissed at himself than he is at Dazai, he shouldn't have given in to his games. He should know better. If this is going to cost him his relationship with Kouyou, he'd rather never sing again.

He hadn't even considered that he also may have upset Mori. Mori liked to be in control, Chuuya knew that, even before Kouyou and Dazai warned him. He was ultimately in charge of Chuuya's career, and maybe he hadn't wanted him to gain so much attention without getting his approval. Chuuya doesn't want to risk his position at PMR, he can't.

Mori glances from him to the video and back, aware that he's seen it. "This was a surprise. I hadn't anticipated this kind of behavior from you."

Chuuya stands with his hands behind his back to hide the slight shaking, holding his wrists in an attempt to calm down. "I apologize, Boss. It was an impulsive mistake. It won't happen again."

"There is nothing to apologize for, Chuuya," says Mori, and Chuuya feels like the room has air again. "I'm pleased with the reaction the video is getting. This video is being watched here in the U.S. as well as around Asia. You can't plan for this sort of promotion."

"I didn't know this would happen," says Chuuya. He keeps his position, but he's back to the same low level of fear and respect he always has during conversations with Mori rather than being terrified.

"I can tell. It's a stroke of good luck for PMR." Mori changes the screen away from the video, switching to a file labeled with his name. "Kouyou had requested for you not to have to record music until you're eighteen. She feels fame is too big a burden to place on someone so young. She's downplayed the progress you've made vocally since starting working here, but this video shows her fears are unfounded."

Chuuya feels a new type of guilt for his actions. He'd thought Kouyou was mad at him, but she'd been trying to protect him in her own way. Her distance made sense now. And she'd risked lying to the boss for him. He has to find a way to make this up to her.

"Kouyou has incredibly high standards," says Chuuya, feigning confidence. He forces a smile. "I'm sure she meant what she said. I still have a lot of work to do before I'm

competent in her eyes.”

“Kouyou is not in trouble, Chuuya,” says Mori, seeming amused at Chuuya’s attempts to defend her. “In fact, her most recent work has been impeccable. She’s been made a Port Mafia Records Executive.”

That was a huge promotion. There were only five of them. Executives were only beneath Mori in terms of power. They held more sway in decision making, had the power to raise certain artists up and totally dismiss others. Kouyou could still record music if she wanted to, but now it would be up to her what type she wanted to do and when unless Mori directly interfered.

Chuuya couldn’t mask his surprise. “She’s only twenty.”

“I’ve always cared more about results than things like age,” says Mori. He brings Chuuya’s attention back to the screen in front of him, which has a complicated timeline that Chuuya can’t read all of unless he wanted to get directly in front of the computer and squint. “But we’re here to discuss your career today. I believe you’re ready to start working on your first album.”

This hadn’t been the direction Chuuya had thought this discussion was going to go. But he knew better than to question Mori’s decisions. “What did you have in mind?”

“I’ve been paying attention to the music you’ve worked on since joining PMR almost a year ago. Not many people have noticed how gifted you are at writing music as well as playing it.” Mori doesn’t give compliments without a purpose, but Chuuya feels proud anyway. The good feeling doesn’t last long though. “So I think it would be best if you were the driving force on this record.”

Chuuya takes that in, wondering how Mori expects him to react. It wasn’t like he wanted other people to write music for him. He does want to be in charge, it would be stifling if someone else was. He’d done that with The Sheep, and he doesn’t want to go back to it, singing songs that he wasn’t proud of, that didn’t have any meaning.

But writing music has never been simple when it’s been for himself. They say to write what you know, what you feel, and Chuuya spends most of his time trying to fucking avoid feeling certain things. Whenever he sat at a piano or a blank piece of sheet music, his mind automatically went to that day nine years ago. It’s like he had a mental block, that he couldn’t write about anything else.

That’s why it had been nice for a while to play stupid pop songs that never went deeper than the surface with The Sheep. He’d never felt anything with that music, but sometimes no emotions were better than the overwhelming amount of anger and desperation his own brought out.

But what was he supposed to do? Say *Sorry, Mori, I can’t write an album because I don’t want to be sad?* It made him almost laugh to picture the boss’s face if he did.

Chuuya doesn't mind too much that he doesn't have choices, had given up on being upset about the lack of control in his life when he'd ran away from his last foster family years ago. Living on other people's couches, you learn to go with the flow. So whatever resentment he feels towards this decision doesn't last long. It's not Mori's fault he's too much of a sniveling mess. He'd power through, like he always did.

"You want me to be the one to write the music?" he asks, tone neutral.

"Well, not all of it," says Mori, no reaction to show whether he'd noticed Chuuya's inner turmoil or not. "You're talented, not a machine. We'll put together a team to help with the compositions and editing and all that."

"I see." Chuuya smiles, although some of it is genuine. "Thank you for the opportunity, sir."

"I know you'll make something worthy of Port Mafia Records, Chuuya," says Mori, cheerful smile and tone. But Chuuya feels it more as a threat, a promise that there will be no leniency if he doesn't deliver.

"Sure thing, Boss," says Chuuya. He doesn't linger, already moving towards the door. "I'll get started right away."

"Just one last thing, Chuuya."

Chuuya turns around, barely holding back a snappy reply. He's oddly thankful for Dazai in this moment for giving him so much practice at not reacting like he wants to when he's pissed. He clenches his fists tightly instead.

"Arthur Rimbaud sent something for you." Mori holds up a familiar hat.

## Chapter End Notes

don't let dazai and chuuya's elitist opinions fool you, Life's Better With A Little Party In It is a BOP

this chapter almost broke me into little pieces, the birthday and arthur scene both got scrapped and totally rewritten but it's fine everything is fine

i almost considered chopping the tour into 3 chapters because of length but fuck it! (why can't i write anything short???)

it's totally your choice if you comment (but if you did, that would be really really cool)

# The Birth of Double Black

## Chapter Notes

\*finger guns\* GUESS WHO IS BACK?! (i tried to warn y'all i didn't have an update schedule (\*/\_\))

a large large shoutout to everyone who commented on last chapter after my (low-key cry for help) call for comments!! my heart, it was warmed. did i tear up? not no.

the tags have been UPDATED due to changes to the story and just stuff i forget

now who's ready to finally hear (well, read) Corruption?!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

### October, Six Years & Nine Months Since the Release of Corruption

One of the very few constants in his relationship with Dazai since they'd met is that he always manages to somehow prove Chuuya's assumptions wrong.

For instance, Chuuya had thought that after everything that happened in August that he couldn't possibly be more pissed at him, that his anger had finally reached its max.

Then he fucking sees what Dazai said about him *musically peaking*, and it turns out his rage actually has a much greater capacity than he'd originally thought. Chuuya honestly thinks he could kill him. Or at the very least maim him.

*He* didn't know how to write real or true music? It was almost funny in a sick kind of way, coming from the person who'd never poured an *ounce* of sincere human emotion into a single song he'd ever worked on.

The majority of the time, Chuuya doesn't enjoy how fame has changed how the rest of PMR's employees treat him. He'd hated going from talking and laughing with everyone easily when he was sixteen to people starting to act differently. Fame is weird, and people react weirdly to it. It acts like a shield, making people retreat into small talk and unnecessary compliments when he speaks to them. Normally, Chuuya makes an effort to break that shield down. He greets everyone by name, asks people about their current projects, tries to remind them that he's no better than they are.

Today, Chuuya is grateful no one dares to talk to him as he storms through the building on his way to Mori's office. The people he does meet on the way take one look at his expression and quickly get out of his way. The man who was going to take the same elevator as him conveniently forgot something from his office and almost trips in his hurry to exit the confined space.

It brings a smile to his face, although he doesn't feel any happiness. Chuuya leans against the back of the elevator as it ascends to the top floor, clenching and unclenching his fists in impatience. He pushes off the surface almost violently when the door opens at his destination.

Chuuya doesn't hesitate to walk straight into Mori's office, not bothering knocking. He opens the door to a thankfully empty room, other than Mori behind his desk. He doesn't seem at all surprised to see him, a knowing look and smile already on his face.

"I had a feeling I'd be seeing you this morning. I had my schedule cleared," says Mori, sliding the folder sitting in front of him closed. He gestures for Chuuya to come forward.

Chuuya crosses the room to stand in front of Mori's desk, too on edge to sit down. He forces himself to take a deep breath though, Mori doesn't deserve him acting out from his emotions. Especially not when he had things he wanted from him.

"I understand your reaction, Chuuya," starts Mori. He's using his patient and placating tone. "But while your outburst last time was salvageable, PMR can't have you and Dazai snipping at each other in the press. It doesn't look good, for us or the Audio Detective Agency. And it'll only spiral and get uglier. So you're going to have to be the mature one and let this go."

"I wasn't intending on responding," says Chuuya. He allows Mori his lecture, even though it was tough not to interrupt. Chuuya might get along better with Mori than anyone else at Port Mafia Records, but even he wouldn't be forgiven for that kind of disrespect. "I actually had a different strategy in mind."

"Did you now?" Mori raises a brow. Chuuya can never actually tell if he's genuinely surprised or not, but he seems it. "What did you have in mind?"

"Two things," says Chuuya. He smiles widely, feeling something other than anger finally-anticipation. "I'm going to need your assistance on the first one though."

"Let's hear it," says Mori, smiling back just as widely.

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### **Mid-July, Six Months Until the Release of Corruption**

In the few weeks since getting back from tour, Dazai finds himself spending more and more time in Chuuya's small (or perhaps it was the appropriate size for someone so miniature) dorm. Chuuya lives in one of PMR's dorms in a building a couple doors down from the main office. Dazai refuses to live that close to work and stays in an expensive apartment slightly further north that he'd told Mori was better for his creative process.

It's becoming almost automatic to start heading here after leaving for the day. Instead of turning right towards home, he would turn left towards the ugly dorm building and start climbing the stairs to the third floor. He didn't get the chance to annoy Chuuya as much as he wanted to during the day, so he had to do it on his own time. Chuuya has started wearing a truly hideous hat, and Dazai hasn't even gotten the opportunity to use barely any of the material he has to mock it.



Something seems slightly...off with Chuuya lately. He wasn't in the office half the time Dazai goes to find him. He isn't working with Kouyou either. There's been some distance between the two ever since Chuuya had upstaged her in South Korea (which Dazai did *not* feel guilty about). Dazai has been trying to get the answer out of Chuuya for weeks, but he's being extremely tight-lipped about it. He hasn't been able to find out through snooping around PMR either. But something has shifted since they returned from tour.

It's one of the things that isn't obvious about Chuuya when you first meet him. He seems like a fairly open person, wearing the majority of his emotions on his sleeve, and he isn't afraid to share his opinion, no matter how blunt. But the closer Dazai gets the more he notices that Chuuya is extremely guarded when it comes to certain things.

Dazai had thought he knew Chuuya fairly well before they left for tour, had him pegged as a short-tempered but predictable teenager who just happened to sing extraordinarily well. Then he'd woken up on a boat to the sight of Chuuya thrashing in his sleep and whimpering just barely audibly. It had shaken Dazai more than he was comfortable with, and then Chuuya had played it off like it was nothing.

It turns out Chuuya is almost as gifted at keeping secrets as he is at singing. Dazai had searched for longer than he liked to admit for a reason why Chuuya would be having nightmares, but he wasn't able to come up with anything. In fact, Chuuya's life before playing with The Sheep was one big empty space. Dazai had noted that he had been in and out of the foster care system back when he'd read Mori's file on him while recruiting him, but he hadn't cared to dig deeper than that. He had seen the redhead as a job, a more interesting job than usual, but nothing worth spending that much effort on.

Now after having lived with Chuuya for weeks while on tour, he saw that he had greatly miscalculated.

Dazai reaches Chuuya's dorm at the end of the hall of the third floor. He pulls out the copy of the key he'd made after stealing Chuuya's (so much faster than having to wait for his dog to come to the door). He wrenches the door open and is about to call out when he hears the sound of a piano coming from Chuuya's music room.

He closes his mouth and follows the sound, locking the door behind him. Chuuya's dorm opens to a tiny combination kitchen and living room. Then there is a bathroom, bedroom, and the music room. The music room is probably intended to be the bedroom, but Chuuya had chosen a grand piano over a large bed and sleeps in what is really an oversized closet.

The whole dorm is covered in Chuuya's stuff. There's sheet music, CDs, and records on almost every surface. The kitchen is littered with empty mugs and an expensive tea set that matched the one in Kouyou's office on the counter. Dazai has to step over shoes and jackets to get to the hallway.

It was a sharp contrast to Dazai's neat and plain apartment. Chuuya had managed to fill his place with more useless stuff in the time he'd lived here than Dazai had in over a year in his own.

Dazai is surprised Chuuya's working on music at home. Usually Chuuya likes to write and play at PMR, he likes to be surrounded by others to get their feedback. It isn't like him to isolate himself, that's more Dazai's style.

He also is curious what Chuuya could be working on, now that he and Kouyou were at odds she wasn't giving him things to work on anymore. Perhaps Hirotsu had given him something, the old man seemed to have also fallen under Chuuya's spell over the course of the tour. That would explain where he'd been disappearing to. Hirotsu bounces around a lot, but he tends to work near the recording studios, far from Kouyou or Dazai's offices. Though why Chuuya wouldn't just say that made it seem less likely. Unless he is just being secretive to annoy Dazai (actually, that seems like a distinct possibility).

He turns the corner to find Chuuya with his back to him. His clothes are casual, he must not have gone into the office today. He still has on the ugly hat though. It looks odd combined with the athletic shorts and sweatshirt. Dazai is surprised he's without his usual choker.

Chuuya's focused on the song he's playing, he probably didn't even hear Dazai come in. Chuuya gets like this, so into the music he's lost to the world. Dazai can't wait to spook him.

Chuuya is playing a song Dazai has never heard before. The piano arrangement isn't in Chuuya's typical style. Chuuya likes to play with a deliberative sort of grace and smoothness to his sound. The keys flow under his fingers with skill to get you to feel the emotions Chuuya coaxes out of them.

This is nothing like that. Chuuya strikes the keys almost angrily, playing more powerfully and harshly. The melody is heavy as well, a complex flow of notes that makes Dazai stop to listen more carefully automatically.

*"A god of calamity,"* Chuuya sings. His voice matches the piano, forceful and strong. *"Everything you touch, you destroy."* He doesn't notice Dazai at all, too wrapped up in the song. *"Nothing will escape you. Arahabaki, Arahabaki, Arahabaki."* Chuuya's voice builds as he repeats the name. The piano does too. He sings the last one the loudest, drawing it out as the piano music comes to a halt.

He pauses for a moment before he begins playing again. The notes are much lighter now, a sharp contrast to before. Chuuya's voice is light too as he sings again. *"What does it mean to be human? Did you trick them into thinking you're human?"* The notes still hold the same anger as before, they're just quieter now.

Chuuya abruptly stops playing and slumps down on the keys with his whole upper body. The piano clangs out, breaking Dazai out of his spot in the doorway. It almost sounds wrong after the music that was just playing. Dazai's mind can't stop playing the notes over again in his head.

This is certainly not a song he's working on for Hirotsu.

Chuuya sighs as he sits up again. He grabs a pen from on top of the piano to mark the sheet music sitting in front of him. Even from this far away Dazai can see the page is filled with scribbles.

Dazai forces down a feeling of unease. He knows Chuuya is talented, he's noticed him expertly tweaking songs for others since he started working for PMR. Dazai hadn't imagined this would be the type of music he'd write on his own though. The level of skill of the song he expected, it was the tone that was off-putting. He fakes a smile as he waltzes into the room.

"Do Chuuya's neighbors complain when he wails on the piano all night?" he asks casually.

Chuuya tenses up severely at his voice but relaxes when he turns to see Dazai. "Oh, it's just you."

"That's a pretty little tune you're working on," says Dazai. He approaches the side of the piano to get a better look at the music Chuuya's writing on. Chuuya has almost ripped through the page with the force of his pen in places. "Although I'm not sure how well it'll sell to an American audience. I didn't know chibi was into Japanese mythology. It doesn't seem like the kind of song they'd play on the radio." Dazai crosses his arms and leans on the top of the piano towards Chuuya.

"I'd rather bash my brains in than hear this on the radio." Chuuya half-snorts. His smile shows no sign of pleasure. He twirls his pen in his right hand slightly violently.

Dazai wonders how long he's been sitting here. This is a mood he's never seen on Chuuya. He'd noticed Chuuya was off lately, but he gets the feeling it was a coverup to hide whatever this is. Dazai has watched Chuuya curse and rage in anger, observed as he stared at an ocean without speaking for great lengths of time. Neither was as unsettling as this dark and bitter aura he's looking at now.

He struggles for what to say next but Chuuya speaks first. "How much do you know about my past?" He turns to face Dazai, blue eyes locked on his.

That was not the direction he'd thought this conversation was going to go. "Infuriatingly little," answers Dazai honestly. Something about Chuuya right now makes lying seem like the wrong move. "And not from lack of effort. If Mori knows more he hasn't left any trace of it anywhere or revealed anything in conversation."

"My mother was a musician," says Chuuya. It's the first time Dazai has ever heard him mention his family. "She also played the piano. She was a concert pianist, although not widely known. She also composed a little from time to time."

Dazai stays silent, afraid he'll break whatever offering this is if he speaks. He doesn't want to screw this up.

"When I was seven, she put me in the backseat of the car and drove off a cliff," continues Chuuya. His voice is emotionless, but he doesn't look away. "I survived, she didn't."

Chuuya's hands tremble slightly at his sides. Dazai glances down at them, feels the odd urge to reach out and steady them. Which is stupid, Chuuya would probably hit him if he did.

Dazai doesn't know what it's like to have feelings about your family. All he feels towards his own is distance, he doesn't really care if he ever sees them again. They had shoved him into music lessons as almost an afterthought, for something to keep him occupied. He's not even sure how Mori tracked him down in the first place. He never used to play anywhere outside of the studio where he had his lessons. He'd only gone with Mori because it had at least the possibility of being interesting.

His family had never done anything to outright hurt him though. Dazai is revolted that someone would treat a child so horribly. But he doesn't interrupt. Dazai might not know anything about Chuuya's past, but he knows who Chuuya is as a person. He wouldn't tell this type of story for comfort or sympathy, there was a reason he was revealing it now.

"It doesn't make sense that I lived," says Chuuya, only frowning slightly. He discusses his own brush with death as if he's describing the weather. "The people who pulled me out of the wreckage were shocked. The car was absolutely destroyed, yet I somehow avoided any fatal injuries. I woke up in the hospital three weeks later, and apart from some scars I was perfectly fine."

Chuuya pauses to get his reaction. Dazai fights to keep his expression neutral. His voice comes out shakier than he would like it to. He won't be the one to look away though. "Then what happened?"

"I didn't do well in the foster care system," says Chuuya, answering his question but also skipping over a million details Dazai wants to know. "When I was thirteen I ran away and met The Sheep. They were the first family I ever had." And Dazai had ripped them away from him, they both add in their heads. Dazai still doesn't regret it though.

"My mom is the one who told me the story of Arahabaki. She told me I reminded her of it." Chuuya sighs deeply. He finally breaks eye contact to look at his right hand as he slides his fingers up and down the keys, touch light enough not to make a sound. "It's not a song about a god, Dazai. It's about me."

*Oh*, thinks Dazai blankly. There was the reason. His whole body feels cold, like Chuuya's stolen all of the warmth out of the room. Now he's the one whose hands are trembling. Dazai has never been a violent person, but he feels the need to destroy something at this moment. Maybe that would rid him of the taste of bile creeping up his throat. He stands up fully, keeping one hand on the piano to steady himself.

Chuuya isn't paying attention to his breakdown. He's gone back to playing the lighter part he was working on when Dazai walked in. It makes Dazai think back to the lyrics, *did you trick them into thinking you're human?*

It hits differently this time. Dazai doesn't want to hear any more. He grabs Chuuya's wrists roughly, forcing his hands away from the keys. Chuuya looks up at him again, expression neutral, but it's clearly an act. He doesn't try to pull away though.

"Okay, fine. Your past is something straight out of a sadistic horror movie writer's wet dream. Why are you writing music about it if it makes you so miserable?" Dazai demands. He sounds almost desperate, surprising himself. He can't decide if he's more sad or angry.

“Mori wants me to release a solo album,” says Chuuya. He shrugs, as if that justifies him hurting himself to do what Mori wants. “He told me when we got back from tour. He was impressed by the reaction *Golden Demon* got, decided I was ready. He wants me to write it myself, warned me that it had to be up to Port Mafia Records standards.”

Dazai feels slightly disgusted with himself. If he hadn’t goaded Chuuya into playing, they wouldn’t be sitting here discussing this. He doesn’t regret the new information, he had wanted to know, but he’s not as pleased as he imagined he would be to finally have some answers.

Some of the blame goes to Mori and Chuuya too. Mori no doubt knew about all of this and just didn’t care as long as he got an album out of it. And Chuuya was never going to tell Mori no. There was no point in Dazai trying to convince him to.

So Dazai focuses on what he can do. “Solo artists are overrated. We should be a duo.”

“What?” asks Chuuya, clearly surprised. He pulls his wrists out of Dazai’s grip to stare at him. His eyes flicker across Dazai’s face, looking for a sign he was pulling something. Dazai makes sure he doesn’t see any.

“We should be a duo,” he repeats. “It makes more sense anyway. Our voices sound nice together.” It was true. He’d noticed when they’d sung karaoke in Yokohama. He knows that Chuuya had noticed too.

Chuuya still looks skeptical. “Mori won’t-.”

“Leave Mori to me,” says Dazai sharply. Chuuya takes a moment, then nods. He doesn’t ease up completely, but there’s less of a heaviness to his posture. He’s more like the person Dazai knows.

Chuuya looks down again at the sheet music for the song he’d just played. He gathers it up and goes to throw it in the trash. The paper is light but the strength Chuuya throws it with makes it clang as it hits the bin.

“That song only works as a solo,” he says, as if that’s the reason he threw it out. “But I’ve got a couple things here that we could tweak into a duet.” He moves back to the piano to begin sorting through the remaining music before pausing and looking up at Dazai.

“If we’re really going to do this, I have a condition,” says Chuuya. His eyes narrow. “I’m not singing a fucking love song with you.”

Dazai rolls his eyes. His relief at things going back to normal is immense. “Ew. Like I’d want to sing one with you, hat rack.”

“Good. Wait, what did you just call me?”

“Now, this is a surprise,” says Mori. He rests his chin on both his hands, leaning forward on his desk towards them. “To what do I owe the pleasure of the two of you coming to see me?”

Dazai would rather stick his tongue out and leave as quickly as possible but the redhead standing next to him keeps him here. Damn Chuuya, always making such a mess of things.

Dazai hadn't even thought that hard about the consequences when he'd offered up the idea to Chuuya. Consequence number one: having to ask a favor from the man he detests. Chuuya owes him for this.

He supposes he could have taken a different route to address the problem. Dazai wasn't sure he could have stomached sitting through that though. This was quicker and easier. Plus, he can admit he's interested in making music with Chuuya.

None of that makes playing nice with Mori any easier.

“Chuuya and I have a proposal for you,” says Dazai. He told Chuuya he'd handle this and the other boy lets him. He knows how Mori works. This will go much easier if he presents it as a choice to Mori. “We'd like to record music as a duo rather than Chuuya doing a solo album.”

Mori's face stays carefully neutral, but Dazai can tell from the gleam in his eyes that he's excited. “Oh, do you? And why is that?”

“There are several reasons.” Dazai lists them off on his fingers. He speaks with a confidence he doesn't feel. “First, our voices fit together well. The sound will be richer with the two of us playing off each other than either of us alone. Second, having two people creates an opportunity to orchestrate a dynamic listeners can latch onto. It'll make interviews and public relations easier to navigate in our desired direction. Third, we're both attractive young men that'll draw more attention as a pair. Especially to young girls.” Chuuya raises an eyebrow at him calling them attractive but adds nothing himself.

“So you've changed your mind about recording music then, Osamu?” Mori asks. He only calls him Osamu when he's really trying to rattle him. Dazai wants to wipe the smirk off his face painfully.

Chuuya looks at him at that, gaze questioning, but Dazai ignores him. Dazai had told Mori that he would never record music for PMR when he'd agreed to work for him. He hadn't been interested in being under Mori's thumb and being famous had seemed so boring. Mori had seemed disappointed, but had agreed without arguing.

Now Dazai was giving him exactly what he'd always wanted, and Dazai could tell Mori was laughing at him on the inside. But Chuuya doesn't need to know any of this.

“It still seems boring, but I figure if Chuuya of all people can do it I should be able to pull it off no problem,” says Dazai, smirking right back at Mori. Chuuya scowls and looks at the floor, playing his part perfectly. Mori chuckles a little at the scene.

“Very well,” he says. Dazai fights down any sign of triumph, but Mori isn’t done speaking. “We’ll give it a try. You two come up with a song for me together, and if it works you’ll record the album as a duo.”

Of course it wasn’t going to be that easy. Chuuya doesn’t look disappointed though, speaking up for the first time. “Sounds good, Boss,” he says easily, without any of the hatred Dazai would have. “Thank you for the opportunity.”

It pleases Mori to see him be so respectful. Dazai just maintains a thin smile and doesn’t say anything. “Of course, Chuuya. I’ll let you boys get to it.”

It’s a clear dismissal. They turn to go, eyes meeting fully for the first time since they’d entered the room. A silent declaration of victory passes between them, even if it’s a small one. Chuuya’s lips turn up just the slightest bit on the left side, out of Mori’s view.

They don’t speak until they’re in the elevator. “I didn’t know you didn’t want to record music,” Chuuya says to break the silence. He always pays more attention than Dazai wants him to.

“We need to start on that song,” says Dazai, completely ignoring the statement. He looks down at his phone to check the number of meetings he has the rest of the week that he feels like attending. “Mori won’t wait long.”

“I don’t want to force you into something you’re going to regret.” Chuuya is watching his face carefully. He could be annoyingly persistent.

“I wouldn’t have said anything if I didn’t want to, mutt,” replies Dazai. His tone is clipped. Chuuya takes it as a sign to give up, looking away. Dazai wishes that made him feel more settled.

Dazai gets off on the second floor, walking towards his scarcely used office. Chuuya doesn’t follow him, which makes him pause. He turns back around, holding the doors of the elevator in place.

“I was serious about getting started on the song,” Dazai practically snaps. He knows he’s really angry at Mori, but Chuuya is not helping by being this obstinate.

“Don’t worry about the song,” says Chuuya, not disturbed at all. He adjusts his stupid hat on his head, leaning against the wall of the elevator calmly. “I’ve got it handled.”

“Nothing else you showed me was all that impressive. Unless you’ve changed your mind about *Arahabaki*?” Chuuya’s expression immediately darkens, practically flinching at the words. It makes Dazai feel better, to have them both be on edge.

“No,” he says forcefully. “I haven’t. And I won’t. This is something else.” He keeps his gaze trained on the elevator rather than Dazai.

“Show me later.” Dazai lets the doors close, not waiting for Chuuya to answer. He walks to his office. It’s situated in a less populated part of the building, which he greatly prefers. He

doesn't have to speak to anyone on his way.

Dazai spends the next couple hours being extremely productive. He lets the music drown out his frustration, gets lost in the nuances of adjusting songs to their full potential (even if that potential was still very low).

Most people didn't care for the little details when it came to music, they cared about the song as a whole without seeing all of the parts that went into it. Dazai is the opposite. He usually doesn't care much for most songs, but making the parts work has always been something he's excelled at.

Dazai can easily pick out the sounds that don't flow right in a song. It's why he can't stand most music. All he hears is all the changes he would make to make it better. People call him a musical prodigy and a genius, but Dazai thinks he just simply listens harder than other people.

By the time he leaves PMR he's calmed down considerably. He still wants to tie Mori's shoes together and push him down the stairs, but that's kind of an every day feeling. Now he's interested in this song Chuuya is so confident will impress Mori.

Dazai enters Chuuya's dorm to see Chuuya lounging on the couch with a controller in his hands. He's playing the racing game he kept beating Dazai at an unacceptable amount of times. The room is clearer than when Dazai was here last though, he must have cleaned up.

Chuuya pauses his game and throws down the controller when he sees him. "Fucking finally. Are you done throwing your hissy fit?"

"I was working," says Dazai with an air of superiority. "I have things to do other than play video games all day."

"Whatever," says Chuuya, rolling his eyes. He stands up and leads the way to the music room. Dazai follows, noting he looks slightly apprehensive.

Chuuya takes a seat at the piano, gathering the sheet music left sitting out on the top of it and shoving it at Dazai. Dazai grabs it, surprised at how neat the writing is. Chuuya has horrible hand writing, he must have taken his time with this. But this wasn't one of the songs he'd shown Dazai before.

"It's called *Corruption*," says Chuuya. He watches Dazai closely as he examines the song.

"Kind of a dramatic title," comments Dazai. He frowns as he tries to picture how it'll sound. Despite the neatness, it's confusing and jumbled. Kouyou had mentioned Chuuya's song writing was for an audience of one, and this seems to prove that.

"Give me that." Chuuya takes the sheet music back and flips to a specific section. He points at a set of lyrics that have a *D* next to them. "This is your part."

"I barely sing anything at all," complains Dazai, reading the notes over. "And what goes in this large blank space here?"



“It’s a piano solo,” answers Chuuya, tone impatient. He scowls at Dazai, running a hand through his hair, clearly irritated.

“A piano solo?” repeats Dazai. He still can’t make out whether the song is decent or not. “In the middle of the song? And you didn’t write it down?”

“Just...,” Chuuya starts angrily before taking a pause to calm himself. Then he meets Dazai’s eyes with an uncharacteristically unguarded expression. “Trust me.”

Dazai doesn’t break the eye contact, struck by the fact that he *does* trust him, with more than just musical ability. Funny, he doesn’t remember deciding to do that. And he didn’t notice when Chuuya had decided to trust him either. Although, looking back it was somewhere before he’d walked in on him playing his greatest secrets in song form and greeted him with only *oh, it’s just you*.

He isn’t sure what he’s supposed to say, but Chuuya doesn’t wait for a response. He looks away to adjust his hands on the piano. He takes a deep breath and flexes his fingers a few times.

*Oh grantors of dark disgrace*

*You need not wake me again*

Chuuya sings the opening a cappella, with his usual vulnerability present. That’s what’s so jarring when he starts playing the piano almost violently, each note thundering. It raises the hairs on Dazai’s arms as Chuuya expertly plays the melody he’s crafted by himself.

*Look at this, it’s my bone,*

*A tip of bone torn from its flesh, filthy, filled up with woes,*

*It’s the days of our lives sticking out*

*Look at this, it’s my heart,*

*A blackened thing, torn out and still beating*

*It’s the thing humans can’t live without*

Chuuya sings the opening verses to match the forceful music, voice loud and strong, no hint of his usual softness. The pace is slow, he hits every note with a purpose, a creation of a feeling of deep sorrow. It builds as he sings the chorus.

*You cannot escape gravity*

*It pulls us all down and apart*

*It rips away the gentlest souls*

*I fear I've been.....corrupted*

He pauses on the last word, lengthening it unnaturally. He starts the second verse a little more manically than the first.

*Look at this, it's my blood*

*A crimson river, dark and churning*

*But I think it's supposed to stay on the inside*

*Look at this, it's my mind*

*A hollow place, a boundless prison*

*But its tainted nature can not be denied*

*You cannot escape gravity*

*It pulls us all down and apart*

*It rips away the gentlest souls*

*I know I've been.....corrupted*

This is the space left blank on the sheet music. Chuuya stops playing for a moment, allowing total silence to take hold. Then he begins to play, softer and higher notes at first with his right hand. He adds deeper notes with his left, building the sound and the pace. It grows louder as he continues, as does the tempo.

Chuuya strikes the keys masterfully, playing a solo that's organized in its disorganization. Dazai realizes he didn't write anything down because he's making it up as he goes, playing what he feels sounds right. It's messy and unsettling, and somehow perfectly fits in the song.

Dazai lets it go on, fascinated at the sight of Chuuya's hands slamming on the keys frantically. He wonders how long he could keep this up for. He's got to reach a breaking point sometime. It hits him then that this is his role in the song, stopping it from reaching that point. Letting it go on long enough to do what it needs to, but keeping the music from ruining itself. It's the perfect role for someone who can pick out the tiny details of the notes.

He leans over and lays a hand on Chuuya's shoulder, he feels him tense and instantly stop playing. Dazai smiles to himself, this song is one of the most compelling things he's ever heard (although not quite as good as *Arahabaki*). He jumps in to sing his part with something close to excitement.

*"What does it mean to be human?"* Dazai sings as Chuuya starts playing a coherent string of notes again, matching Dazai's pace of the words. The music is light and soft. *"I'll make you be human. You're no longer human, no longer human. Wake up."*

They sing the next part back and forth at each other, Chuuya alternating between the notes of the chorus and Dazai's softer bridge notes.

*You cannot escape gravity (what does it mean to be human)*

*It pulls us down (I'll make you be human) and apart*

*It rips away the gentlest souls (You're no longer human, no longer human)*

*I think it's time to....wake up*

They sing the last line together, voices still blending together as seamlessly as they did in a cheap karaoke bar in Yokohama. Dazai usually doesn't care much for duets, one singer almost always overpowered the other or ruined what made the other's voice unique. But this isn't like that, it's an even match.

Chuuya switches back to the tone of his usual style for the outro, softer and cleaner. It wraps up the journey of the song nicely. He sings the last lines with a sense of regret.

*Oh grantors of dark disgrace*

*I fear I've woken again*

The song ends and Chuuya fiddles with his fingers as he pulls his hands off the keys. He tries to keep his face blank as he turns to see Dazai's reaction. He's blatantly nervous though.

It's clear Chuuya's taken the feelings behind *Arahbaki* and worked them into this song, but made them somewhat lighter, especially with Dazai's part. Dazai wonders how he was able to put the song together so quickly. Dazai had noticed he was a skilled songwriter, but not to this degree. Chuuya and his secrets, there always seem to be more.

"It'll do," says Dazai simply. Okay, maybe Chuuya doesn't owe him anything. "But we're going to have to work on your vocals, you're a bit pitchy."

"You're insufferable," says Chuuya. The bright look in his eyes makes the scowl he's trying to pull off ineffective.

After a few slight changes from Dazai, they had played *Corruption* for Mori. He had been even more satisfied with the song than Dazai had anticipated. Dazai rarely sees him looking so invested in music. He'd given the green light for them to start working on the rest of the album as a duo.

Dazai had signed a standard Port Mafia Records four-year recording contract, so there was no turning back now. He'd drawn up enough contracts for others during his time here, being on this side of it had been unpleasant. Mori had crafted it himself, so there weren't any loopholes or mistakes for Dazai to take advantage of.

Mori's only condition for the album had been that Chuuya still be in charge creatively, which had been a distinctly awkward moment for the two of them. Dazai had felt slighted, surprised, and uneasy. Chuuya had struggled between a mixture of pride and nerves. The words still hang awkwardly between them.

After they'd left Mori's office they'd gone back to Chuuya's dorm. Dazai had settled onto the couch, ready to start working. He had a few different arrangements they could try to work into something. Then Chuuya had turned on his video game console, not intending to work at all, and taken a seat in the armchair without noticing the glare Dazai is giving him.

"What are you doing?" asks Dazai, snatching the controller off of the coffee table and away from Chuuya.

"What's your problem?" asks Chuuya, clearly confused.

"I thought we would get started on that album we just fought to get approved for," says Dazai flatly. "I know you're not used to working much, but they generally tend not to write themselves."

"It's called taking a fucking break," says Chuuya sharply, rolling his eyes. "I'm not a machine, I can't just spit out songs on demand."

“So what? You’re just going to play video games until another masterpiece comes to you?” asks Dazai, giving him an unimpressed look.

“Do *you* have a song idea?” asks Chuuya, almost like a challenge.

“As a matter of fact I do,” says Dazai, grabbing his phone and opening to the audio recordings he’d saved. He throws the phone at Chuuya with more strength than is necessary.

Chuuya catches it before it hits him in the face. “Don’t blame me if you break another company phone.”

Chuuya rearranges himself in the armchair so he’s sitting cross-legged, with the phone close to his face. He presses play on the first file and listens intently, brows furrowed in concentration and biting his lip. He keeps the same expression as he plays through the second, third, and fourth. Dazai is silent as he watches, but he’s getting more and more impatient. He crosses his arms and quietly taps a finger against his shoulder in annoyance.

Chuuya tosses the phone back to Dazai after he listens to the last one, letting out a small sigh. “Yeah, none of those are going to work.”

“Oh, really? One song and you’re suddenly an expert?” *While Dazai’s input will no doubt be of great value, I still want Chuuya to be in charge creatively of the album*, lingers Mori’s voice in his head. It fuels his annoyance to a much deeper level of anger. “I wrote full albums worth of songs while you were still playing sheepdog.”

“Yeah, I get that you have more experience than I do,” says Chuuya, slightly annoyed from the taunt. “But that doesn’t mean I’m wrong. These arrangements are just, I don’t know, boring and predictable.”

Dazai has been called a lot of things in his life, but never boring and predictable. It stings more than other insults. Chuuya seems to catch on to how offended he is, his expression slips from annoyed to apologetic.

There is nothing less that Dazai wants in this world than pity, especially coming from Chuuya. He can’t be here any longer. The small room has suddenly become stifling. Dazai stands up abruptly, walking to the door as quickly as his feet will take him. He turns back as he wrenches the door open.

“Well then, I’ll leave you to your break.” Dazai says the words perfectly calmly, but his eyes are burning with anger when he looks at Chuuya.

Chuuya opens his mouth as if to say something but Dazai walks out before he can, slamming the door behind him.

Dazai goes back to his apartment rather than the office. He’s been more on edge than he can ever remember since this entire thing started. Perhaps he’d made a mistake. It would be hard to weasel out of it now that he’s already signed the paperwork, but he’s sure he could pull it off if he put his mind to it.

He entertains the thought for just a moment before giving it up completely. It isn't really what he wants. Although what he does want is harder to figure out. Dazai chips away at the problem for the rest of the day in the back of his mind but never gets any closer to an answer. He tries to edit music but everything he works on gets drowned out by the words *boring and predictable*. He ends up switching to working on tasks unrelated to music at all, album marketing and shipping issues mostly.

When Dazai wakes up the next morning he truly doesn't feel like going back to Chuuya's dorm, but it's regrettably the only course of action forward. He's the one that had stormed out, and Chuuya isn't the type who would chase after him. Objectively Chuuya hasn't done anything wrong, but the thought of seeing him sets Dazai's teeth on edge.

He arrives to the familiar door at the end of the third floor hall with a tight knot sitting in his stomach. Dazai takes a moment to collect himself then opens the door carefully for once, not flinging it open as he usually does. His eyes find Chuuya immediately, turning to look at who's entering from the kitchen. Dazai can't help the frown that automatically jumps to his face at the sight of him.

Chuuya doesn't look that pleased to see him either. "You're back," he comments, not moving from his place at the kitchen counter. He'd been pouring himself tea, and he doesn't offer Dazai any.

"I don't supposed you've found any inspiration," says Dazai, walking over to the other side of the counter, tone as mocking as he could make it. He gives Chuuya his most impassive expression.

"God, I hate it when you give me that blank fucking look." Chuuya glares at him. "You look like a stupid fish. Mackerel bastard." He mutters the last part under his breath as he takes a sip of his tea.

"If you were an animal you'd be a slug," Dazai counters, voice innocent but smirking widely.

"Oh?" asks Chuuya, leaning over the counter towards him, smiling darkly.

"You've got all the characteristics of a slug," says Dazai, not thrown off at all by Chuuya's threatening look. "Small, slow, and ugly," Dazai lists happily.

"Funny, I remember you telling Mori I was an attractive young man." Chuuya smirks at him, and Dazai has to fight not to dump Chuuya's tea over his head.

"I was negotiating, I would have said anything," says Dazai coldly.

There's a long pause where they just look at each other, both slightly scowling. Then Chuuya sighs loudly and runs a hand through his hair.

"About what Mori said, about me having creative control of the album," says Chuuya, hesitating around the words. "You know that's bullshit, right?."

“I highly doubt he was kidding,” says Dazai, not quite keeping all of the bitterness out of his voice. He wishes Chuuya had just left the subject alone. It felt like he was picking at an unhealed scab.

“I’m not saying he was, but he’s not in charge here,” says Chuuya. He looks Dazai directly in the eye, dropping all of his earlier standoffishness. “I’m not fucking above you or whatever. If we’re going to do this, we’re going to do it as equals, as partners. Got it?”

Dazai takes that in, lips twitching in an effort not to smile. Perhaps what he wanted isn’t that complicated after all. He nods in agreement to Chuuya’s declaration, but there’s still more that they haven’t settled. “As your partner, I think we should at least try writing a song.”

“Think of all the great song writers,” says Chuuya, switching topics with ease. “Not the ones that just did well at the time, but the ones whose music has stuck around for decades. People like Hemingway, Tolstoy, Victor Hugo. What do they all have in common?”

“They’re a bunch of old dead guys?” asks Dazai sardonically, unimpressed by the semi-lecture Chuuya is giving.

“No. Well, yes, but that’s not the fucking point.” Chuuya leans over the counter again, much less threatening this time. “Their music is still relevant today because people connect with it, it makes them *feel* something. That’s the kind of music I want us to make. I didn’t reject the stuff you showed me yesterday because I thought it was bad, it was fine. But I know you, and I know you can do better. You’re a freaking musical genius, that kind of stuff comes to you without any effort. I’d like to see what you can do when you actually fucking try.”

Dazai has been called a musical prodigy since he was a child. The compliments and praise had stopped having an impact on him long ago. But it’s different coming from Chuuya. Chuuya often says the biggest difference between them is that Dazai is a liar and he’s not. He doesn’t say things he doesn’t mean. If he says he thinks Dazai is capable of writing great music, he truly believes it. And Dazai doesn’t place much stock in the musical opinions of others, but Chuuya is one of the exceptions. All of his earlier annoyance evaporates completely.

“You’re a demanding little slug, aren’t you?” asks Dazai, whining dramatically. “Fine, we’ll do it your way. But it’s going to take so much longer.”

“Quit whining,” says Chuuya, clearly trying to fight off a smile, and not very successfully. “Do you want any tea?”

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## **August, Five Months Until the Release of Corruption**

It takes Dazai a moment to realize where he is when he wakes up, which is foolish because he’s in his own bedroom in his own apartment. Chuuya’s dorm has become their unofficial writing spot, and he’d been staying over there most nights. He’s become very acquainted with Chuuya’s large, ugly couch. It’s easier than going home in the middle of the night.

To say their writing schedule is erratic would be a vast understatement. They'd once gone two weeks without a hint of progress and then finished three songs in three days. Chuuya's inspiration came on suddenly, and he could spend all night getting a song right when the mood strikes him.

Dazai would be annoyed with the process if they weren't seeing any results. But the truth of the matter is that the album is shaping up to be something even Dazai has to admit has some real substance to it. He finds himself humming the songs to himself when he's alone.

Yesterday he and Chuuya had called it a night early, they'd reached a blank spot and Chuuya kept shooting down every idea Dazai had to fill it. In the beginning Dazai would have fought him on it, but now he knows better than to force something when it didn't match Chuuya's "vision". But having the same argument over and over had taught him it was better to try something new than keep pushing.

Dazai had wondered after *Corruption* if their album would be filled with only bitter and angry ballads, but the rest of the songs they've finished range from angst-ridden borderline rock songs to fast-paced pop to slow and melancholic. Dazai calls it eclectic, Chuuya calls it a clusterfuck.

Because of this they can't find a title for the album. Chuuya's dragged a large whiteboard into his living room that serves as their growing track list, a place to work out lyrics, and their list of potential album titles (and doodling when Dazai gets bored). Dazai's favorites include *Album Titles are Fucking Stupid*, *Things to Listen to Instead of Sleeping*, and *Slug and Mackerel's Doo-Wops*. Chuuya doesn't even try to erase the ones Dazai writes anymore as long as they're not dog related.

Dazai walks from the bedroom towards the kitchen. One of the worst parts of staying at Chuuya's is his obsession with tea. He never has any coffee. Dazai has considered dragging his coffee pot over there, but he still maintains that he is *not* living there. So he either gets caffeine-withdrawal headaches or suffers drinking tea.

"You're finally awake."

Dazai is not proud of the sound he lets out at the words. He whips around to find Chuuya sitting on his couch, watching him with a smirk. Dazai quickly tries to catch his breath, heart still beating uncomfortably fast.

"How did you get in here?" demands Dazai, walking into the living room. He stops to lean against one of the armchairs, eyes narrowed at Chuuya.

"You made a key to my place," says Chuuya, obviously proud of himself. "Fair's fair."

Dazai rolls his eyes. "Why are you here?"

"I wanted to show you something," says Chuuya, dropping his superiority for excitement. He gestures to a pile of sheet music sitting on Dazai's coffee table. "I couldn't sleep and ended up writing this. I figured your insomniac ass would be up too, but guess I was wrong."



Dazai sighs but grabs it and starts to read. It's titled *Wake Up Call*. He's slowly learned the ins and outs of Chuuya's song writing language, but it's still not easy to decipher all the thoughts and scribbles into a coherent piece of music. He frowns as he tries to make out this one.

"What's the 'S' for?" asks Dazai, flipping to the second page. The song goes from a quiet jazz beginning to a hard transition into an electric guitar driven melody with the lyrics *Do you know when it's okay to chicken out and go home? Well, the answer's never.*

"Saxophone," says Chuuya, as if that were clear.

Dazai snorts a little. "I guess we'll have to go into the office to find someone to play this then. First read through shows promise at least."

"Huh," says Chuuya, raising an eyebrow. "I half-thought you'd know how to play one. It seems like the type of thing you'd hide just to spring on people."

Dazai rolls his eyes, throwing the sheet music back at Chuuya. He's smiling as he goes back to the kitchen to grab his coffee pot. "Let's stop at your place first. I want to drop this off. I'm sick of your grass drinks."

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### **September, Four Months Until the Release of Corruption**

Chuuya isn't required to tell Dazai where he's going. They don't spend every day together, they'd probably kill each other if they did. Chuuya spends more time than Dazai ever would with Tachihara. He also goes into the office to pester Hirotsu every once in a while. Chuuya makes friends with a bunch of PMR employees who Dazai doesn't even know the names of.

Still, it's irritating when Dazai has something to show him and he has to wait around for him. He'd come up with a new idea for a song, he's calling it *Rain Beyond the Window*. He's actually pretty sure it'll work. Two months into this thing now and he feels like he can already predict how Chuuya will react to a song before he even plays it for him.

He'd amused himself for a while changing all the CDs in Chuuya's dorm so they were in the wrong cases, but he'd finished that and now he's bored. Dazai has his laptop open in front of him, but he doesn't want to work on other people's music right now. He debates going out to try and find the slug when the door opens.

"Where have you been?" asks Dazai, putting his annoyance at his absence clearly into the question. He puts down his laptop on the coffee table.

"The movies. Then I had a meeting with Mori." Chuuya shuts the door with a slight slam.

"You're having solo meetings with Mori now?" Dazai makes himself sound grossed out, but he's mostly anxious. He didn't want Mori digging his claws into Chuuya. They already get along much better than Dazai is comfortable with.

“It wasn’t scheduled,” says Chuuya, toeing off his shoes by the door. He seems agitated. “I took Elise to some bullshit kids’ movie. It was awful, and the music was unbearable. But she’s a lonely girl, you know? So I don’t mind.” Chuuya crosses the room to lean over the side of the armchair, frowning as he looks at Dazai. “But when I dropped her off back at PMR, Mori was there, and he had an idea for a song for the album. He wants us to do a duet version of *Golden Demon*.”

It’s an excellent idea, which makes Dazai deeply unhappy. Chuuya is obviously unhappy too, although for different reasons. “And now you have to ask Kouyou for permission?”

Chuuya’s expression darkens even further. “No, he already had. She agreed.”

Chuuya’s ongoing feud with Kouyou is a landmine that Dazai takes great pains to avoid addressing. Dazai had overheard a conversation between Kouyou and Mori back in July at the office after they’d decided to record the album as a duo. Kouyou had gone to see Mori to tell him that it wasn’t a good idea.

“I was under the impression you thought Chuuya and Dazai functioned better together,” Mori had said. He’d smiled innocently.

“I meant they could be more productive if they didn’t spend all their time squabbling,” Kouyou had replied, posture tense. “Not release an album together. Do you really think it’s wise to put those two together?”

“It was their idea,” Mori had said, as if he had no power in the decision. “Besides, I was once given some advice, only a diamond can polish a diamond.”

Dazai had left the conversation more annoyed at the both of them. He’d never told Chuuya about it.

“Ah,” is all he says.

“Whatever,” says Chuuya angrily. “Clearly you all think it’s a good fucking idea, so we might as well do it.”

“I can find reasons it’s a bad idea,” offers Dazai, keeping his tone neutral.

Chuuya sighs roughly, but shakes his head. “No, it is a good idea. I just wish...” He sighs again, crossing over to the white board. “Never mind, it doesn’t matter.”

Chuuya adds it to the track list, gripping the marker almost violently. They’re up to nine songs now, ten if things go how Dazai thinks they will.

“I’ve got an idea for an album title,” announces Dazai, thinking back to what Mori had said about them. He doesn’t think of them as diamonds, that’s for sure. But they were two halves of something.

“Go,” says Chuuya, shifting over to write in their space dedicated to potential titles.

“Double Black,” says Dazai, voice confident. It feels different than the suggestions he’s given before. It fits better.

Chuuya doesn’t write it down. He turns to face Dazai instead, his eyes excited. “Soukoku.”

Dazai just smirks, and Chuuya smiles back, laughing slightly. He turns back to the board, whipping the other potential titles off with his sleeve.

He writes the title above the rest of the songs instead, making it official. *Double Black*.

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### **October, Three Months Until the Release of Corruption**

Kouyou is watching him closely over the rim of her teacup. She’s perfected how to look intimidating over the years, and Dazai isn’t immune to her cold stare. He’s still not sure why he’s here exactly, he just knew that when Kouyou summoned you, it was best to show up. He highly doubts she wants to talk to him about the *Golden Demon* duet, seeing as she isn’t even talking to Chuuya about it. Her agreeing to them doing the song seems to have put her and Chuuya more at odds than ever rather than mending anything.

She hadn’t mentioned what the meeting was about, just calmly poured them both some tea when he’d arrived. She drank out of her cup almost immediately after pouring it, when it still had to be boiling hot. Dazai had fought down how impressed he was by it, it wasn’t wise to compliment people when you weren’t sure what they wanted.

While Chuuya and Kouyou were extremely close (or had been, and will be again, Dazai is sure one of them will break down and apologize soon enough), Dazai has never spent a lot of time with the woman. She’d already worked for PMR before Dazai had started, and she hadn’t gone out of her way to get to know him when he’d joined.

Although Dazai didn’t blame her for that, he wouldn’t have been fighting to get to know the person who Mori had brought with him when he took over the company. Most of PMR’s employees had given him a wide berth during that shit show of a transition. It was for the best, and once everyone saw that everything smoothed itself out.

But nevertheless, he and Kouyou had never gotten on well, and Dazai didn’t foresee that changing. Dazai thinks she’s massively talented and worthy of her position as an executive, he just didn’t like her all that much as a person. And he’s fairly certain it’s mutual. His part in the whole South Korea incident hadn’t helped her warm up to him either.

“Did I ever tell you I once tried to leave Port Mafia Records?” asks Kouyou, breaking the slightly heavy silence. Her tone is casual and her expression neutral.

“I had heard that,” says Dazai, matching her nonchalant tone. “Not from you though.” It was something most people who worked at PMR knew, although it was never mentioned in front of the singer. Also, naturally, it was one of the first things Mori had ever told him about Kouyou Ozaki, that she had a loyalty issue.

“I was sixteen, and I was in love.” Kouyou says the word as if it’s a disease. “It was the beautiful, terrible kind that makes you feel like it’s the only thing in the world. I was convinced it was enough, and abandoned my recording contract on nothing more than a promise.”

“I was a fool and back in L.A. within two months,” continues Kouyou, glaring at her tea as if it’s her younger self. “The old boss lorded it over my head constantly when I got back. Mori doesn’t, he only brings it up when he needs something from me.”

It’s clear that she prefers Mori’s way, even if it gets deeper under the skin because he wields the information like a precise weapon. That was Mori though, he was cordial and cheerful up until the very moment he needed to be something else, then he was the most vicious and cruel person in existence. Dazai has seen him ruin artists’ careers, make deals with the most despicable crowd of people to get ahead in business, use his connections to smuggle more than just music overseas. There isn’t a line Mori wouldn’t cross to get what he wants.

Dazai has long given up trying to decide which side of Mori is the true one. The fact that he could slip into the darker one so easily is enough for Dazai to know he isn’t to be trusted. Dazai didn’t care either way if Mori broke the law or other people, he just knows that he has to watch his back if he didn’t want Mori to break Dazai one day if it suited his purposes.

“I do not want Chuuya to repeat my mistakes,” says Kouyou, finally getting to the point of the story. She looks directly at Dazai, expression serious.

This was part of that loyalty issue. At the end of the day, Kouyou ultimately puts herself and those she’s claimed as her own over everything else, including Port Mafia Records. She’d claimed Chuuya long ago, and despite the ongoing argument between the two, she clearly still thinks of him as someone she needs to protect.

“And why are you telling me this?” asks Dazai, voice flat. Of course he knows why, but he’s going to make her say it, even if it feels like twisting a knife inside his own stab wound.

“The two of you are close. I think it would be best if you didn’t get any closer.” She words it like a suggestion, but it comes off as a clear warning. Her eyes are hard as she looks at him, her posture tight.

Dazai laughs, only half-forced. “You think that’s likely?” The question is clearly mocking.

He’d underestimated how observant Kouyou is. It would be best to dispel Kouyou of these notions before they went any further. He certainly didn’t want her to spread them to anyone else. The thought of her telling Mori any of this makes him have to fight to keep his cool.

Dazai sets his untouched tea down to deliver his explanation, tone losing all trace of lightness. “Chuuya is one of the greatest assets PMR has, but his biggest weakness is himself. If I hadn’t stepped in he would have crashed and burned alone. I didn’t want to waste all the effort we put into him. It wouldn’t reflect well upon me for one of the artists I recommended to be such a disappointment.”

Kouyou listens to this attentively, only frowning slightly at the end. “I suppose that’s for the best.”

“Why are you upset then?” asks Dazai, slipping back into his fake cheerful tone and smile.

“It’s unsettling how much you remind me of Mori sometimes.” says Kouyou, no indication that she knows her words feel like a slap to the face. Dazai keeps his smile in place, if nothing else Mori had taught him how to do that. “I’m not upset for me, I’m glad you aren’t mucking things up with teenage fantasies. I just feel sorry for Chuuya, he thinks of you as more than a tool for success.”

Dazai doesn’t let any of what he feels show on his face. He shrugs, feigning disinterest. “This is L.A. If it wasn’t me, it’d be somebody else.”

“Ah, but it is you,” points out Kouyou. “Perhaps I should let Chuuya know your opinion of him,” she adds, voice light but dangerous.

“Perhaps *I* should let Chuuya know that you’re making decisions for him without consulting him again,” counters Dazai easily. He smirks as she flinches a bit. “That is how you ended up with this current distance between you two, is it not?”

“I think we’re done here,” says Kouyou, voice stone cold. Her eyes narrow, and if Dazai were a weaker person he’d buckle under the weight of her steely gaze. But working under Mori did have its perks.

“I haven’t gotten to finish my tea,” says Dazai, smiling innocently.

“You don’t even like tea,” snaps Kouyou. She scowls deeply, annoyed as having lost her temper. She recovers her composure to dismiss him. “Take it with you if you want. I believe you have an album to finish.”

“That’s alright, I’m not very thirsty,” says Dazai to her offer, standing up. He flashes her one more big smile. “Thanks for the advice, Ozaki.”

Kouyou doesn’t reply, just glares at him as he walks out of the office. Dazai doesn’t look back.

His mind is already busy calculating next steps.

Obviously there needs to be some changes.

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## **Early December, One & A Half Months Until the Release of Corruption**

Recording an album has become painfully boring.

It had been more interesting when he and Chuuya were the ones being recorded. The number of times he’d gotten to have Chuuya repeat the same lyrics over and over while calling him pitchy had been fun. Chuuya had ended up throwing extremely expensive sound equipment at him in a fit of rage.

(He'd behaved while recording *Corruption* though. Dazai had limited the people listening to only those necessary in the room too. They'd been able to get through it pretty quickly because it was only two sets of vocals and the piano. It had still been tense in the studio. Chuuya had struggled to accept all the compliments on the song, so Dazai had done it for him. He was happy to be finished with that one.)

But those times were behind them. The vocals, piano sections, and the guitar parts Chuuya played were finished. Now they were recording all of the instruments Dazai and Chuuya wouldn't be playing themselves.

Chuuya doesn't even show up to listen every day anymore. He had in the beginning, but he had gotten frustrated listening to Dazai adjust and readjust the same lines of a song repeatedly until he was satisfied. Now Chuuya waits until Dazai deems a part finished before he approves it. He usually doesn't have any changes (and his few ones were annoyingly insightful).

Dazai should be glad he's not there distracting him. It's for the best. He could focus better without Chuuya barking at him. Dazai doesn't need to spend time lazying around in Chuuya's dorm anymore either now that they're done writing. He hasn't seen much of Chuuya at all lately.

Listening to small sections of the same songs day after day is starting to wear him down though. He's slumped in a chair in the recording studio they've been using. He's alone for the moment, having finally finished the part they were working on and had sent everyone away so he could think in peace.

He has a hand covering his eyes when he hears the door to the studio open and close. He hopes whoever entered sees his position and turns around to leave without bothering him.

"You want to get out of here?" asks a familiar voice, ruining his hopes. Chuuya pokes at his hand until he puts it down to look at him. He's dressed casually, so he hadn't been working. Chuuya smirks at him, and Dazai sighs at his offer.

"Do I want to ask permission to leave and then be followed around by whatever leech they assign to drive us around?" he asks, rolling his eyes. "No thank you, hat rack."

"I wasn't planning on asking." Chuuya holds up something in his right hand, a driver's license. It has Chuuya's picture on it. He displays it cockily.

Dazai sits up straight, more than a little shocked. "How did *you* get a license? Can your tiny legs even reach the pedals?"

"Stop being a dick or I'll leave your bandaged ass here," says Chuuya. He holds out a hand to help him up. "Are you coming or what?"

Dazai narrows his eyes at him in suspicion, ignoring the offered hand. "You don't have a car." Or at least Dazai hopes he doesn't, hopes he hadn't been that unobservant.

“I don’t.” Chuuya’s eyes light up with mischief. “But there are a lot of company vans sitting out in the parking lot. And, what do you know? I found a pair of keys lying around on my way here. Rather careless of them to leave them out where anyone could grab them.” He takes back his hand to dig in his pockets then holds up a set of keys triumphantly.

Dazai smirks back. Chuuya had many different sides, and while Dazai’s favorite was always going to be his musical one, rebellious teenager Chuuya wasn’t that far of a second. “Lead the way, chibi.”

They take off to the parking lot, holding back snickers as they climb into one of the black vans. Chuuya seems totally at ease adjusting the seat (Dazai would point out how close he is to the wheel if Chuuya wasn’t directly in charge of the vehicle and therefore his life at the moment) and mirrors, no hesitation as he backs up smoothly and drives them out of the lot. He doesn’t ask Dazai where he wants to go, evidently already having a destination in mind.

“How did you learn to drive?” asks Dazai as he watches Chuuya, who has one hand on the wheel and the other resting on the ledge of the driver’s side window, the picture of relaxed and satisfied. He doesn’t have the nerves of an inexperienced driver. But Dazai would have heard about someone from PMR teaching him.

“Like I said, PMR leaves a lot of company vans just sitting there. It wasn’t hard to take one unnoticed,” says Chuuya, laughing a little. “I started trying to learn once we got back from tour. Plus I’ve had a lot of free time on my hands lately. The mackerel that was stinking up my dorm has disappeared.”

It doesn’t come off as an accusation, but it makes Dazai defensive anyway. “I’m working on *our* album. Just because you’ve decided your part is finished doesn’t mean the rest of us can slack off.”

“You’re being an obsessive bastard about it,” says Chuuya, rolling his eyes. “It would be finished already if you weren’t so fucking nit picky. I swear to God you almost made that drummer have a nervous breakdown.”

“I’m not going to release something that’s inferior,” says Dazai petulantly. “He’s a professional, he shouldn’t be so bad at taking constructive criticism.”

Chuuya laughs, shaking his head. “You called him a mediocre idiot with the rhythm of a wet mop.”

“He was being difficult,” says Dazai, looking out the window. They were driving towards the coast, and he’s still not sure where they’re headed.

“He almost quit, and he would have if I hadn’t gone after him and apologized for you being such a freak,” says Chuuya, which Dazai hadn’t known. “I told him you were a stupid perfectionist with a giant stick up your ass and not to take it personally.”

“Mori would have fired him if he quit,” says Dazai, not sure how he feels about Chuuya cleaning up his messes behind his back.

“Don’t get people fired by being a jackass,” commands Chuuya, glaring at him while pulling into the parking lot for a run down ice cream stand. Dazai doesn’t even see a sign advertising the name of the place. The only other cars in the parking lot are probably the employees. He doubts the place gets a lot of business even when it’s not December.

Chuuya parks the van in a spot up front, turns the car off, and turns to Dazai. “What kind of ice cream do you want? Never mind, I’ll just get you the most disgustingly sweet flavor they have.”

Chuuya doesn’t give him a chance to respond, and Dazai is left watching him jump out of the van and walk away. In retaliation Dazai messes with the vent settings so they’ll blast Chuuya when he turns the car on again.

A few minutes later Chuuya walks back to the car with a cone in each hand, one that looks chocolate flavored and the other a rainbow of colors. He shoves them both at Dazai as he gets into the van. “Be useful for once.”

Dazai rolls his eyes but takes the cones. He makes a big show of taking a lick of both of them. Chuuya doesn’t seem surprised, instead he focuses on turning all the vent settings back to normal before he turns the van back on. Dazai pouts as he licks more of his cone (not that he’d ever admit to Chuuya that he likes the flavor).

Chuuya drives them a little further down the block to a different parking lot for a public beach. He parks in a spot near the edge of the lot without any other cars around. They have a clear view of the ocean. It reminds Dazai of the Yokohama ports in a way, perhaps that’s why Chuuya had taken such a liking to the place.

“Afraid to park next to the other cars?” asks Dazai as he hands Chuuya his cone. Dazai’s already halfway through his own.

“Shut up and eat your ice cream, mackerel.” Chuuya turns the van off but keeps the radio on. He throws back his seat so he can put his feet up on the dashboard. He looks completely relaxed, lounging in the sun that’s streaming through the windshield and swaying one of his feet to the song playing on the radio.

Dazai pointedly looks away to watch the waves instead. “How’d you find that dump anyway? It screamed health violation.”

“Shirase worked there a couple summers ago,” answers Chuuya. “We all used to go there and get shit for free.”

Dazai hasn’t heard him mention any of the members of The Sheep in a while, not since he’d written that song about them. He’d thrown the lyrics at Dazai with the title *It’s Harder to Tell The Difference Between Wolves and Sheep Than You Think* and said, “This is either a good song or petty bullshit. Figure it out and let me know.” (It had turned out to be both.)

But he’s never heard Chuuya talk about any of them without any bitterness like he just had. It makes him ask something he’s always wondered. “How did you end up playing the keyboard for The Sheep?”



Chuuya pauses eating to shoot him a dirty look. “Because we were all fucking friends? I know it’s a foreign concept to you.”

“Don’t be dense,” says Dazai, ignoring the insult easily. “I’m asking how when they had you in the band *Shirase* ended up as the lead singer.” He finishes his cone and wipes his crumbs onto the van’s floor.

Chuuya snorts a little, lips raising in a smirk. “Because Shirase was the only one who didn’t know how to play an instrument and it was his band. Nobody wanted to fight him on it. Plus, we weren’t all that serious about music. We bullshitted about getting big and being famous, but it was mostly just for fun.” He takes a large bite out of cone, smile slipping. “Or at least it was for me.”

Dazai doesn’t say anything back. In his personal and professional opinion, The Sheep were all idiots. The fact that they’d let Chuuya go without a fight proved that. Sure, he’d manipulated them into it, but they’d known Chuuya for years. Dazai hasn’t know him for that long, and he would never make a mistake like that.

The song on the radio changes over to something new. The lyrics “*I think that they’re watching us. Don’t let them catch you committing thoughtcrime if you want to live,*” make Dazai groan immediately.

“Ugh, turn that off,” he demands, scowling at the dramatic lines and annoying and repetitive music that went with them.

Chuuya twists the volume down, raising his eyebrows. “Not a George Orwell fan?”

“*1984* is deeply unpleasant to listen to,” declares Dazai. “It’s even worse than *Animal Farm*, which I didn’t think was possible.”

“Do you even listen to music when you’re not working?” asks Chuuya, shoving the last of his cone into his mouth and wiping his hands on his sweatshirt.

“Why would I waste time doing that?” Dazai asks back, rolling his eyes.

“You’re impossible,” says Chuuya. He turns in his seat to give him a searching look. “You have to have a favorite song.”

Dazai gives him a bored look in return. “I don’t.”

Chuuya narrows his eyes, but Dazai doesn’t react. He huffs in frustration and pulls out his phone. Then he reaches across Dazai to open the glove compartment to grab a cord to plug it into the car with (the fact that he knows where the cord is means he was telling the truth about his van borrowing habits).

“There has to be something you fucking like,” says Chuuya, scrolling through his music. “I’ll play you my favorite song at the moment. I don’t know how familiar you are with Japanese music, but it’s a song by a group called Luck Life, *Namae wo Yobu yo*.”

“I’ll Call Your Name,” translates Dazai as Chuuya finds the song he’s looking for. He doesn’t think he’ll care for the song, but he wants to hear what kind of song Chuuya would pick as his favorite. He wouldn’t have been surprised if Chuuya had picked a PMR song or one of Kouyou’s, he was sentimental like that.

The song started out softly, with a pretty guitar bit. A cymbal and the bass cut in right before the singer started.

*Boku ga boku de irareru*

*Riyuu o sagashiteita*

*Anata no mune no naka de*

*Ikiteiru boku ga iru no naraba*

*Kurayami mo nagai sakamichi mo*

*Koete ikeru you na*

*Boku ni nareru hazu*

“Chuuya, this is so *sappy*,” says Dazai over the music as it builds to the chorus. “I never would have pegged you as a ballad lover.”

“*Namae wo yobu yo, anata no namae wo,*” Chuuya sang along, ignoring Dazai. He knows the words perfectly. “*Anata ga anata de ireru you ni.*”

I’ll call out a name, your name, so that you can remain who you are- Dazai translates in his head.

It was a nice song, even if it was a bit dramatic for Dazai’s tastes. Chuuya doesn’t understand why Dazai doesn’t listen to music, but Dazai doesn’t understand why Chuuya listens to music when every version of every song Chuuya does himself is just effortlessly *better*.

Dazai knows he’s a talented singer, but he wasn’t like Chuuya. Chuuya’s voice was...Dazai didn’t often not have the words for something, but he can never describe how his singing made him feel. He’s known him for over a year, has heard him sing for hours on end, has heard him be pitchy and countless off notes. But the effect hasn’t worn off yet.

Dazai frowns deeply, this kind of thinking is troubling. Despite all the efforts he’s made, he still finds it coming up more and more. Fucking Kouyou, putting ideas in his head that he’d been better off without.

And even if he *was* considering such absurd things, it just wasn’t possible. There was no way that Dazai would *ever* offer up that kind of thing for Mori to use. He can picture exactly how

it would go, how Mori would twist the thing between them to get the reactions he wanted. Everything about them would become part of his game, everything would be manipulation.

Dazai would rather have nothing than have that.

Still, sometimes when Chuuya did things like kidnap him and sing to him in stolen vans in front of the ocean with the sun illuminating him and his voice being the only thing Dazai was focused on, it's hard to remember all that.

But Chuuya had a point, trying to distract himself by dissecting their album note by note wasn't a good strategy. And avoiding Chuuya was just boring in addition to everything else.

Chuuya misinterprets his expression, thinking he's judging the music they're listening to rather than scolding himself for being stupid. "Oh, fuck you, it's a good song."

"Fine, I'll play Chuuya my favorite song," says Dazai, grabbing Chuuya's phone and flicking through it. He finds his choice easily. He smiles at Chuuya widely as it starts, cranking the volume up.

*It's a Friday, and it's been a hell of a week*, blasts out the speakers. Dazai laughs loudly as Chuuya scowls and turns the volume down.

"I fucking hate you," says Chuuya, tone harsh but it just makes Dazai smile even wider.

"Let's go finish our album, chibi."

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## **The Night of January 24, Hours Until the Release of Corruption**

"What if everyone hates it?" Chuuya asks. He's pacing back and forth in his dorm living room. Dazai's lying on the couch, extremely calm despite Chuuya's ever increasing anxiety. "I mean, who even releases music as a duo anymore? Who do we think we are, the fucking Grimm Brothers? And a fucking spontaneous piano solo, what was I thinking? Why would you let me do that?"

"Chuuya, it's going to be fine," says Dazai flatly, rolling his eyes. He's getting tired just watching the redhead. "Have I ever lied to you?"

"Yes, like every fucking day," says Chuuya automatically, not stopping his pacing.

"Have I ever lied to you about *music*?" adds on Dazai.

That forces Chuuya to pause, frowning as he considers the question. "No."

"So trust me on this," says Dazai, turning to look directly at Chuuya. He speaks plainly, no deceptions or manipulations. "People are not going to hate it, the fact that duos are less common is one of the reasons it's going to work, and the piano solo is what makes the song. Now stop being so dramatic."

“Fuck,” swears Chuuya. He takes a deep breath, but at least he’s stopped pacing. He heads into the kitchen then, and Dazai hears him starts messing with his tea kettle.

“That better be non-caffeinated,” he calls out, turning back to lie down on the couch fully. He pulls out his phone to read his emails, most of them about the release tomorrow.

“Don’t mother me, it’s creepy as shit,” says Chuuya loudly so that his voice carries. “Do you want some?”

“I’m not mothering you, I’m being a responsible pet owner. We have a long day tomorrow, and I need my dog looking its best.” says Dazai. “And you can keep your disgusting hot leaf water to yourself.”

Chuuya doesn’t reply, and Dazai responds to a couple emails. By the time he’s done Chuuya is setting down two mugs on the coffee table. Dazai is about to protest he didn’t want any stupid tea when he notices that it’s hot chocolate. He hadn’t noticed when Chuuya had bought that.

He picks up his mug to hide his smile behind it, lifting the cup towards Chuuya as his only thank you.

“Are you really not nervous at all?” asks Chuuya, settling into the armchair next to the couch. His question is plain, not asking him why he’s not nervous, just wanting to know if he is or not.

“I don’t base my opinion of myself on the musical opinions of the general population,” says Dazai, risking burning his tongue on the hot chocolate. Luckily Chuuya didn’t keep his kettle on as of high a setting as Kouyou did, and all he gets is the taste of chocolate. “I’ve seen enough trash do well to not place much stock in them.”

“So you don’t care what people are going to think about the album?” Chuuya carefully twists in the chair so his legs are over the side but he’s still upright enough that he doesn’t spill any of his tea.

“I mean, business-wise I’m invested.” Dazai takes another sip of his drink. “But I know that it’s going to do well. The music industry isn’t as complicated as people make it out to be.”

“You’re that confident?”

“I could explain all the factors involved, but it would just bore you,” says Dazai, and adds before Chuuya gets pissy, “And beyond all that, it’s just genuinely good music. I actually have standards, and they’re met.”

Chuuya’s face lights up at that, more carefree than he usually would be. He seems more at ease, which is the point of the compliment (even if it is the truth). He drinks his tea in quiet content.

Chuuya stands up once he’s finished, stretching his arms over his head. “Are you staying?”

Dazai almost spits out the hot chocolate he'd just drank. In all the numerous times he's stayed here, Chuuya has never been this *polite* about it, this borderline welcoming. He swallows roughly. "It is late," he says neutrally.

"I'll see you in the morning then," says Chuuya, yawning a little. He runs his hands through his hair and walks towards the bathroom. Dazai watches him go, a slightly suffocating feeling in his chest.

He fights it down as he turns off the lights in the main room then goes back to the couch. Dazai gathers the blanket left over the top of couch (he refuses to think of it as his, even if no one else uses it). He turns to face the couch to sleep, trying to get comfortable. If he was a smarter person, he would have left hours ago and been sleeping in his own perfectly comfortable bed.

In spite of that, he falls asleep incredibly easily, with the taste of hot chocolate lingering in his mouth. He even sleeps later than he usually does. The sun is bright in the room when he opens his eyes, and he feels oddly well-rested.

Dazai grab his phone, not surprised to see it filled with notifications. But there is one that sticks out in particular, a meeting invitation from Mori with no details other than the description: *Tour*.

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### **Double Black, Chuuya Nakahara & Osamu Dazai**

1. *Rain Beyond the Window*
2. *The Fake Flower's Deceit*
3. *The Setting Sun*
4. *Never to Return*
5. *Wake Up Call*
6. *Shame and Toad*
7. *No Room for Sentiments*
8. *Some People Are Matches, Others are Pyromaniacs*
9. *Dead Apple Pie*
10. *Null*
11. *Golden Demon (Double Black Version)*
12. *It's Harder to Tell The Difference Between Wolves and Sheep Than You Think*
13. *Corruption*

### **Chapter End Notes**

I realized writing this chapter that I had never revealed the ADA stood for Audio Detective Agency until now lol

The beginning of Corruption is taken from real life Chuuya Nakahara's poem "A Bone"!

I've written a lot of sad lines in my day but "it's not a song about a god, Dazai. It's about me" fucks me up

The entirety of the album actually is some kind of BSD reference or pun.

apologies to any george orwell fans out there

did i make chuuya accidentally serenade dazai with the 1st BSD ending? you bet your ass i fucking did

y'all encouraged me to make my chapters as long as i wanted. you reap what you sow

(just because i'm not making a cry for help this time doesn't mean I'm still not desperate for comments)

# Call Me Hopeless, But Not Romantic

## Chapter Summary

when i tagged slow burn and mutual pining I MEANT IT

title from the mayday parade song of the same name (which is a good song)

## Chapter Notes

So uh...does it make up for when I don't update for a month if the chapter is 26k+ words (i wish i were kidding even a little bit)? but if you can't really leave your house right now like me maybe it's a good thing?? or if you're joining us for the first time, thank you for choosing this oddly over-researched musician AU as your quarantine fic!

(remember when i split chapter 2 and 3 because they were too long? \*starts laughing hysterically until it turns into sobbing\* the people who encouraged me to make my chapters as long as i wanted to are living in regrets)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

### **Early November, Six Years, Nine and a Half Months Since the Release of Corruption**

*Port Mafia Record's CEO Sets the Record Straight About Double Black Feud* is the subheadline of the article. It's not even close to the most irritating thing about it, but Dazai is deeply annoyed by it. Mostly because of how it's a humongous lie.

He hadn't expected this when he'd walked into work this morning. After a couple weeks had gone by without a response from Chuuya, he hadn't thought he was likely to get one. Chuuya's anger usually had an extremely short and extremely explosive fuse. He didn't often take the time to plan out his revenges, he liked to get them as immediately and as viciously as possible. This is out of character for him.

(There's a nagging voice in the back of his head saying maybe this *is* in character for him now. Maybe he's changed, and Dazai just doesn't know him anymore. Dazai shuts that voice down harshly.)

Regardless, the article is an offensive series of half-truths designed by Mori to reclaim the narrative and make the chess pieces all line up in his favor. The beginning is a bunch of trash

about the future direction of Port Mafia Records, Akutagawa, and some other rising artists and groups. Dazai skims through it to get to the parts about himself.

**Q: What do you have to say about the escalating animosity between Nakahara and Dazai?**

A: Oh, I wouldn't take it all that seriously. Those two are always at odds. It's much more frightening when they are getting along. People always used to ask me how I got the idea to put them together, but it was actually their idea. But when it comes to how they approach music, they are complete opposites, so arguing is their natural state of being. They used to do it in front of a much smaller audience, but now with things being what they are, it's turned into this. When it comes down to it they both deeply respect the other professionally, so I wouldn't place much stock in this squabble.

**Q: What about Chuuya's comments about hating *Corruption*? There was a lot of fan outcry about that.**

A: Chuuya is an artist, and he feels very strongly about the music he creates. I've never met anyone who pours more of themselves into their music. He's an inspiration, and we're very lucky to have him at Port Mafia Records. That being said, he can get very passionate about those feelings. I don't think he really believes that *Corruption* is overrated. I think he gets annoyed that people try to trap him in the success of that one song. Chuuya has been a guiding hand in creating phenomenal music the past couple years. He likes to focus on the future and new things instead of dwelling on the past.

The rest of it goes on to say more, but Dazai doesn't bother reading on. The worst thing is that it isn't all false. There had been a time where arguing with Chuuya was his normal. But that time had long passed. And this argument in particular is the most real and nasty one they've ever had, it is not harmless jabs. Dazai isn't usually an angry person, but he's still furious even months later.

Not to mention Chuuya's distaste for *Corruption* had nothing to do with being annoyed at the popularity of the song. Dazai actually wishes it were that simple.

Dazai can't help but admire Chuuya's response, getting the person Dazai hates most in the world to answer for him. It stings, and it also had a different message that Chuuya wasn't going to play this game anymore. He's still glaring at the article when the president approaches his desk.

"I just got off the phone with Ogai Mori," announces Fukuzawa. He doesn't seem pleased at all about the phone call. He fixes his gaze on Dazai, eyes solemn. "We've reached an agreement about this business between you and Nakahara."

"What sort of agreement?" asks Dazai, already dreading the answer. Leave it to Chuuya to have a double-pronged strategy. He'd never been one to back down, and there was a reason Dazai had never been able to pull off a definitive win in all their conflicts. Dazai would be impressed if it were directed at anyone other than himself.



“In the mutual interest of both parties,” says Fukuzawa, tone serious, “The two of you are no longer going to speak about the other in public. If asked, you will respond that you have no comment. This is nonnegotiable, Dazai.”

“I understand,” says Dazai, though the words stick a little in his throat. But it is sincere, he would never dare to disobey a direct order from the president.

Fukuzawa had taken a huge chance on Dazai when he’d hired him. He’d taken him in when he was still clearly at odds with Port Mafia Records. With all the legal (and not so legal) resources at PMR’s disposal, that was a bold move for the much smaller and less well known Audio Detective Agency.

Fukuzawa hadn’t been intimidated though. He’d only said that he knew and was not afraid of Mori, and they hadn’t discussed it any further. Dazai has held a huge amount of respect for the man since. He might not always display it, but his opinion means a great deal to Dazai.

He isn’t going to do anything to jeopardize that, or the ADA. Dazai hadn’t thought he would ever care so much about the place he works for (he never had with PMR), but he’s surprisingly attached to it. The people here are good, and they work tirelessly to do all the work that PMR has legions of people to complete. The end products might not be as polished, but they’re certainly made with more integrity.

Dazai’s past and unresolved issues with Port Mafia Records are already delicate subjects around the office, and ones that he typically doesn’t like to draw more attention to. Normally he never would have acted like this, but his logic had never been as sound when it came to Chuuya, an unfortunate side effect from his teenage years that he hasn’t been able to shake.

Fukuzawa seems to believe him anyway (sometimes Dazai worries everyone here is a bit *too* trusting). He simply nods. “You will also acknowledge the anniversary of *Corruption* in January,” says Fukuzawa, tone still serious but eyes kinder, as if he knows the news he’s giving is unwelcome and grating. “It doesn’t have to be anything extravagant, just a show of good faith that the hatchet has been buried.”

Dazai has made a career out of lying, so he shouldn’t be as bothered to have to do this. He’s had to do things that required much more from him than a simple acknowledgement. But this lie in particular burns more than any others that he can remember (because the hatchet is *not* even a little bit buried).

“No problem,” says Dazai, flashing a huge grin at the president. He throws in a thumbs up to push it over the top.

“Thank you,” says Fukuzawa, bowing slightly. He turns to go back to his office, but is caught by Ranpo and forced into a conversation about why the ADA needed a new toaster oven for the break room.

Dazai watches, not really listening. He’s clutching the article in his hands tightly, slowly ruining the pages.

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## February, One Month Since the Release of Corruption

Everyone had told Chuuya that the album was going to do well. He'd been reassured over and over again. Everyone had been wrong.

The album isn't doing well, the album is having an almost unprecedented level of success.

The numbers are kind of too large for Chuuya to comprehend. He remembers the feeling of intense victory he'd gotten when they'd gotten shitty local radio stations to play one of their songs back with The Sheep. Now it's like he can't go anywhere without hearing himself on the radio, and on real national stations. The social media pages he'd been forced to create by the marketing people are blowing up.

Kouyou had warned him (back when she was speaking to him) about how success could change a person's life. She had said that fame was like a spotlight without an off switch. Chuuya gets what she means now. It's like overnight Chuuya Nakahara has become a household name. He can't even walk down to the corner store to pick up ramen without being recognized. It is beyond weird.

It is also kind of awesome.

The number of times people have reached out to him online or in person to tell him they like their music is insane. Chuuya knows that people make music for all kinds of reasons, for fame, for money, because it's their job. But music has never been just work for Chuuya, music is the thing that makes him feel alive. So to hear that other people connect to the music he made, the stuff that came from him, is fucking incredible.

The album is doing particularly well in Asia. Chuuya had barely hid his pleased smirk over that when Mori had told him. Apparently the Southeast Asian division of PMR had gone full out promoting it. (Chuuya had sent a copy of Double Black to Arthur as soon as they were finished with it. He hadn't included a note. He supposes this counts as Arthur's reply.)

He finds himself spending more time with PMR's CEO than he ever did before. While Mori had always been his odd and cold version of pleasant and cheerful in their previous encounters, now he seems less cheerful but more genuine. Chuuya might actually believe him when he says he likes the album. Chuuya often ends up lingering and talking to Mori for longer than what he went to see him about. Mori will ask his opinion on snippets of songs or piano arrangements. Chuuya is honest and tries not to fuck up this new dynamic. Chuuya is kind of surprised to find that he *likes* Mori as more than just a boss.

Dazai is never present during these instances. When Dazai is there, the interaction is never longer than it needs to be. It's like Mori and Dazai are both completely different people when they're in the same vicinity. And both of those people are crazy and unpleasant, and Chuuya can't stand to be around the two of them together. So he just tries to get out of there with Dazai flinging as few insults at their boss as possible.

There is, of course, a dark point to all of these changes. And its name is *Corruption*.

Naturally, it's their most popular song by a huge margin. When Chuuya hears them on the radio, that's the song that's playing. Nine times out of ten when someone reaches out to compliment him it's about *Corruption*. Barely anyone at PMR had heard the song before they'd released it, so he's not even safe in the office from endless people coming up to him and telling him how great it is. Chuuya can't go anywhere without *oh grantors of dark disgrace* following him.

It's not that he hates the song. It's more complicated than that. It contains so much about himself that he would rather keep hidden. It feels like he's screaming his secrets for the whole world to hear, that everyone will hear how fucked up he is in the notes. Every time he sings it he has to get back in the headspace of those feelings. Every time he strikes the keys of the piano in the solo he has to draw on that maelstrom of anger and pain and pathetic longing he usually shoves down as far as it can go.

On the other hand, it is also about him and Dazai. Chuuya had thought that he wouldn't be able to write music with anyone. He'd never thought he would be able to show someone the things that went on inside his head. Dazai had taken every doubt he'd ever had and crushed them into dust. Chuuya hadn't even planned to tell Dazai anything. He had been working alone on a song that is still unfortunately hard to push out of his mind when all of a sudden Dazai had been there and Chuuya was telling him everything. But he doesn't have any regrets, telling him had felt right.

The feeling he gets when Dazai cuts him off in the middle of the solo in *Corruption*, Chuuya has never felt more *known*. It's dizzying and terrifying and Chuuya hates it and craves it and spends a lot of time actively trying not not think about it.

Luckily, *Corruption* isn't their only song. With that exception, singing with Dazai is as easy as breathing. Chuuya doesn't have to think about harmonizing or pacing, it just comes naturally. Chuuya thinks it's partially due to Dazai's genius and their compatibility as partners (not that he would ever say that out loud to another person).

Writing the album together has made them into something new and distinct. Dazai could be such a fucking shit at times, but Chuuya *trusts* him. There isn't anyone else who he could do this with. There isn't anyone else who he *wants* to do this with.

Partners, Chuuya had called them. It's a fitting description. There are still things that Chuuya doesn't know about Dazai (because he's secretive and a liar almost done to his very core apparently), but Chuuya knows the important things. He doesn't really give a shit why he wears bandages or how he started working for PMR in the first place. Well, he *does* want to know that stuff, but it pales in comparison to knowing who Dazai *is* underneath all his bullshit.

Chuuya has seen his mind at work, expertly coming up with music as if it's just another language he speaks. He's noticed how he gets the most genuine joy out of video games or cheap junk food rather than the extravagant things he could afford with his PMR salary. He knows it is, in fact, possible to truly piss him off, and when he's actually angry he lashes out aggressively and doesn't believe in apologies. He's been on the receiving end of the subtle kindness that Dazai excels in giving without ever expecting any thanks (and in fact preferring

it if you don't call attention to it all) that he never would have anticipated from the jackass he thought he was when they were fifteen (he still *is* a jackass, just a very different kind).

They're practically living together. Chuuya has thought about taking the plunge to make it official and moving to one of the nicer dorms with two bedrooms. But Dazai is so skittish about this kind of stuff and between all the tour prep, Chuuya figures it can wait. Dazai is the one who's sleeping on a couch, and he isn't complaining.

Chuuya is extremely eager to go on tour. He'd been surprised when Mori had sprung the idea on them without warning, but after he'd gotten over his shock he got excited. He'd always loved performing. Getting to play shows with Dazai is something he hadn't know how much he wanted until the offer was in front of him.

They've been practicing for the last couple weeks with the people who are going to go on tour with them. Tachihara is going to be their drummer, which is awesome (despite *still* holding a grudge about Beijing). Hirotsu is their tour manager. Chuuya had laughed pretty hard when he'd heard that. The old man had said over and over again during Kouyou's tour that babysitting them wasn't his job, and now it literally is his job.

Adjusting to playing the music with everyone is going fairly well. None of the issues come from him or Dazai. Chuuya had heard the songs from their album enough times when they were recording that he thinks he could play them in his sleep. Luckily he'd gotten Dazai to drop the perfectionist obsession for the most part (although he still won't stop fucking calling Chuuya pitchy).

Playing the actual music isn't the problem. Stage training, on the other hand, is excruciating.

Chuuya has never been more comfortable anywhere than on a stage. It's the one place where he never feels like he has to be anything other than himself. He doesn't need to be *taught* how to act during a performance. He thinks it's stupid to plan it out in advance, that it makes it cheap and inauthentic.

Chuuya doesn't really know what to make of Isamu Yoshii, the man "training" them. Although everyone calls him the Count (which Chuuya thinks is fucking pretentious). He'd been brought on by Mori personally, and seemed highly respected by almost everyone.

"Body language is just as important as the words coming out of your mouth," says the Count, his voice formal and expression serious. He's standing at the front of the stage in one of the practice spaces at PMR. He's still lecturing them on the theory of stage presence, as he has for the last three days. He and Dazai are standing in the center of the stage (although Chuuya wonders why they're bothering using the space because all they do is listen to the Count drone on and on).

Chuuya would not count himself among the people who highly respect him.

He glances out of the corner of his eye at Dazai, who's listening with a perfectly neutral face. He looks back at Chuuya for a moment, his lips quirking the slightest bit. Chuuya faces forward again, biting his lip to keep from scowling. Dazai doesn't buy in to the Count's nonsense either, but he gets a huge kick out of how much it annoys Chuuya.

“Despite your age and inexperience, you have to demand the attention of an entire arena of people, and that requires gravitas,” says the Count, no trace of noticing the exchange between them. He also seems to think that because they’re young they’re complete idiots, which is not helping Chuuya with keeping his temper. “Luckily, this is something that can be taught. Now, Chuuya, come forward here.”

Chuuya is startled to be singled out. But he walks forward to join the man closer to the front of the stage.

“A perfect example of how *not* to move,” says the Count, giving Chuuya a look of contempt. Chuuya doesn’t bother to hold back the scowl this time. “Weak posture, sloppy walk, no emotion.”

“You didn’t say to act like I would while performing,” says Chuuya tightly.

“I shouldn’t have to,” says the Count haughtily. “You should behave as if someone is watching you at all times. People are going to be watching you if you’re on stage or off. You are always performing.”

“We’re not robots,” says Chuuya, crossing his arms and glaring at the man.

“No, you’re entertainers,” says the Count, not reacting to Chuuya’s clear anger. He’s as calm as ever. “Throw your little childish tantrum now rather than on stage. You may be teenagers, but that is not the version of yourselves you will be presenting to the world. The music is mature, and we will rise to that maturity. We are going for soulful, wise beyond your years, elegant.”

Chuuya bristles at the insult and is ready to storm out of there when Dazai pipes up from behind them. “Are we going to start singing anytime soon?”

The Count turns his disapproving eyes to Dazai instead. “Very well, perhaps you two learn better doing rather than hearing. Come join us, Dazai.”

Dazai does, and Chuuya can see the laughter in his eyes at the entire situation. It helps Chuuya regain a little bit of his composure. At least he doesn’t have to suffer through this alone. *Partners.*

“Now, we do have a slight advantage as there are two of you. That allows us to create a dynamic, to play off each other,” says the Count. He looks between the two of them, eyes searching. “Let’s give it a try. Sing the opening lines of *Rain Beyond the Window*.”

So he *does* know their music, thinks Chuuya to himself smugly. He shrugs and starts singing, doing his best not to strain his voice (Kouyou’s voice still rings in the back of his head and reminds him of the importance of taking good care of his vocal instrument). “*Another day of morning rain, I don’t recall the last time I saw the sun.*”

He looks to Dazai, who’s opening his mouth to sing the next lines before the Count cuts in. “No, stop. That was terrible.”

Dazai's good nature about the situation seems to fade away completely. "Was it? I forgot that you're such an impressive singer yourself, Yoshii," says Dazai sharply, mocking and insincere.

"Not the *singing*," says the Count, shaking his head. "I'm talking about the *delivery*. As a duo, you should always be aware of what the other is doing. They should be an extension of yourself. Every move they make should have a corresponding reaction from you."

"That's not how I would do it if this were a real performance," says Chuuya, rolling his eyes. He doesn't care if he's disrespectful. "I can't fake it anyway. It doesn't feel the same."

The Count listens to that, not very impressed with the explanation. "Fine, try singing it *to* Dazai."

Chuuya lets a deep breath out of his nose but does as he's told. He faces Dazai fully, locking eyes. It's a little strange. Chuuya has sang in front of and for Dazai more times than he can count, but not like this. It's also weird to have the Count watching them.

"*Another day of morning rain*," sings Chuuya, the words sticking in his throat a little bit. "*I don't recall the last time I saw the sun*."

Dazai's face flitters through a bunch of expressions, but Chuuya can't place them. He eventually settles on his blankest look (the one Chuuya has dubbed The Mackerel Stare). He looks towards the Count and away from Chuuya instead of singing back.

"Ah," says the Count, contemplative. "No, that won't do either. It would be best if you sing *with* each other instead."

"This is such a waste of time," declares Chuuya, feeling his face heating up. "You're just saying a bunch of generic bullshit. We get it, it's important to put on a good show. We need to be aware of each other on stage. But that is not more important than the actual music or playing off the actual crowd, which you seem to be fucking clueless about. We don't need you."

"Mori seems to think otherwise," says the Count, a hint of irritation slipping through for once. He's still looking at them with an air of superiority though. "He entrusted me with making sure you two were performance ready, and so I shall."

"We *are* performance ready," snaps Chuuya. He gets closer to the Count and points a finger at him for emphasis. "Listen up, asshole. I'm not going to sit here and let you look down your prissy nose at us. I don't care what Mori said. We're done with stage training. Let's go, Dazai."

Chuuya doesn't wait for Dazai to reply, he just walks off the stage, with the best posture and fucking gravitas he can muster. He's pulling open the door when Dazai catches up to him. He walks through it into the hall before turning to face him, still scowling.

Dazai bursts into laughter as soon as the door closes behind them, clutching the wall to support himself. "I wish you could have seen his face when you walked out like that, chibi,"

says Dazai, in between the laughing.

“He’s such a fucking dick,” says Chuuya, leaning against the opposite wall. He smiles a bit imagining the Count’s expression though. “I’ll deal with the fallout from Mori.”

Dazai stops laughing, his smile slipping away. “I don’t think he’ll care much. He probably assigned it more as a formality. Neither of us has ever had any issues on stage. The Count is known for fixing problem singers, which is why everyone has to put him on such a pedestal.”

Chuuya nods, casually latching onto the fact that somewhere along the way Dazai had performed enough to know that he’s comfortable with it (just because he’s accepted not knowing everything about Dazai doesn’t mean he’s going to be passive about it). He doesn’t say anything, just starts leading the way out of the office and back to his dorm. Dazai follows, then starts laughing again. Chuuya looks over at him, brows raised.

“I can’t wait until we do media training,” says Dazai, smiling widely. Chuuya snorts and shoves him towards the wall.

Chuuya is trying very hard to appear calm as he walks down the hall towards Kouyou’s office. It’s funny, this is the part of the building where he had spent almost all of his time a year ago. Now it just sets him on edge. He used to find it peaceful how quiet it was here, presently it comes off as kind of eerie. He’s not sure if the stilted nods and greetings as he walks by are from his newfound fame or how he’s no longer welcome in this section of the office. Kouyou could have moved her office up to the executive suite on the upper floors with her promotion, but she’d chosen to stay here.

To say Chuuya is surprised to have received an invitation from Kouyou to meet would be a massive understatement. At first when Chuuya had gotten the email he had thought it was some sick joke. He’d read it three times over before he realized it was legitimate. The details had been sparse, just a request from Kouyou Ozaki to meet at 2PM two days later.

Chuuya had started to get used to the idea that he would leave for tour without resolving things with Kouyou. It had been a devastating thought, but he’d made himself accept it as reality. Now he’s unsure of what’s waiting for him at this meeting. There had been a time where he would have jumped at the chance to talk to Kouyou, to work things out, but with all the time that’s passed and everything that’s happened, he’s more conflicted.

He’d tried so hard to apologize to Kouyou last summer, he’d reached out over and over again, only to be shut down brutally but courteously (as only Kouyou could). Then he’d started working on the album, and he’d gotten too busy, and then it had gotten to the point where it felt like the distance was too great to tackle and Kouyou wasn’t going to accept anyway, so he’d given up. But it’s like a wound that had never really healed, he’d just gotten more adept at bandaging it (damn it, Dazai is even infiltrating his fucking metaphors).

He knocks when he reaches Kouyou's door, politeness ingrained at this point. Kouyou calls for him to come in. He straightens his hat on his head, taking one last deep breath before entering.

Kouyou is sitting behind her desk, still in the middle of writing something down. Chuuya walks over to one of the chairs in front of the desk, sitting upright rather than comfortably. He waits for Kouyou to speak first. She's the one who called this meeting, he isn't going to do any of the work for her. She finishes whatever she's writing before looking up at him, a careful smile on her face.

"I'll pour us both some tea," offers Kouyou, standing up. It gives Chuuya a sense of déjà vu, this is how things used to always start out.

"No, thank you," says Chuuya, surprising himself a little. He hadn't planned the cold tone it comes out in either. It feels right though. He isn't going to let Kouyou pretend nothing between them has shifted. She deserves to face the consequences of her choices. "Preparing for tour, don't have a lot of time. What did you want to see me for?"

Kouyou's expression tightens slightly, her only admission she's caught off guard. She sits back down and looks directly at him. Her voice is more business-like than friendly. "The album is doing extraordinarily well. You must be very proud."

"I am," agrees Chuuya, putting on a flippant (if not slightly taunting) smile at the compliment. "But not all the credit goes to me. I couldn't have done it without the people who were there to support me."

"Of course," says Kouyou, not reacting to the challenge. "Port Mafia Records always supports its own. Mori in particular seems extremely pleased with the record."

"Yup," says Chuuya lightly. "Boss has been really good to us throughout the whole process."

"You seem fonder of him than you used to be," notes Kouyou, clearly not pleased with the observation.

"I've gotten to know him a bit more. He's less intimidating than he appears," says Chuuya, tone steady. He's not going to just follow Kouyou's opinions of people blindly (anymore). He can make his own judgements.

"You have to realize that Ogai Mori is someone best kept at a distance," says Kouyou, slipping in just a bit of irritation and impatience.

"I don't have my head in the sand," snaps Chuuya, losing his own patience. He did not come here for a fucking lecture. "You and Dazai think I'm so stupid. I'm not some clueless kid who doesn't see everything that goes on here. I knew what Port Mafia Records was like before I even signed here. Do you think I don't know why it was possible to put a tour together so quickly for two relatively unknown artists?" he asks, rolling his eyes. "Mori made it possible. Do you think we're better than him because we don't get our hands dirty directly?" He gives her an unimpressed look. "We all benefit from it."



“He’s a parasite, Chuuya,” says Kouyou, looking more sad than angry about his outburst.

Chuuya doesn’t know Mori all that well, and he wouldn’t call them close. But Mori had given Chuuya what he’d always desired more than anything, a place to belong. For that, he had Chuuya’s loyalty. He knows he isn’t exactly a good person, but he doesn’t really care. Everyone is capable of terrible things, he’s seen enough of the world to know that. All that matters to him is that Mori never asks him to be anything he isn’t, he lets him create the music he wants. The rest is ignorable.

“He’s a man, a cunning man who isn’t afraid to do what needs to be done to succeed,” says Chuuya plainly. “Spare me trying to play the moral high ground.”

Kouyou sighs quietly, but changes the subject. “I didn’t ask you to come here to talk about Mori.”

“Then why did you ask me to come here?” asks Chuuya, barely resisting pointing out that’s what he asked in the first place.

“I wanted to talk to you. This whole thing has spiraled on for far too long,” says Kouyou, more hesitant now. She chooses her words carefully. “I...regret how things have turned out between us.”

“Do you now?” asks Chuuya, eyes narrowed. “Funny, I must have missed all those times you reached out. Oh, wait, that was me, reaching out to you. And you shut me down every time for *weeks* until I stopped bothering. And *now* you regret it?” He snorts and crosses his arms.

“You’ve changed,” says Kouyou. She’s watching him with a slight frown.

“Yeah, that tends to happen when you don’t speak to someone for six months,” says Chuuya with a half shrug.

“I’m trying to apologize here,” says Kouyou, losing some of her composure. It’s probably wrong it makes Chuuya feel better.

“You’re doing a great job,” says Chuuya, dripping with sarcasm, cruel smirk automatic.

For a moment he doesn’t believe his eyes. That’s how astonishing the sight is. But those are definitely tears gathering in Kouyou’s eyes. She jerks to the side to try and hide them, lifting a hand to cover her face. Kouyou, who barely bats an eye at most things, who keeps an iron clad hold on her emotions.

Chuuya is out of his chair and around the desk before he even decides to move. “Hey,” he says quietly, gently moving her hand away from her face. He crouches down to lean in close and whisper soothingly, “Hey, hey, hey. No, don’t do that.”

“I’m sorry,” says Kouyou, it comes out sort of strangled, half words and half muffled sob. “I’m *sorry*. I’ve been so terrible.” The tears slip down her face despite her obvious efforts to try to keep them from falling. “But I was so angry and so jealous, and I cut you off. And then it was like you didn’t even need me.” She shakes a bit, sniffing a couple times. “And I didn’t

want to lose you, but I didn't want to admit that I needed you. Because every time I admit I need someone it ends badly. And I've been so lonely. And you seemed totally fine."

"Are you kidding me?" asks Chuuya. He takes Kouyou's hand and squeezes it. "Every morning I make myself tea with the kettle you bought me as a birthday present. Every morning I look at that freaking kettle and I'm miserable, Kouyou. Miserable." He swallows roughly, looking down. "I wanted to talk to you about the album so badly. But I didn't want to...intrude where I wasn't wanted."

"You are wanted here," says Kouyou, the sharpness in her tone making him look up. Even crying she could still sound strong as steel. "You are always wanted here. I'm a stubborn fool, and don't deserve your forgiveness this easily. But I'm selfish, so I'm going to take it anyway."

Chuuya scoffs, "People don't need to deserve forgiveness. It's up to the person giving it." He smiles at her, letting go of her hand and leaning against the desk. He doesn't bother with fake good posture anymore. The relief at not having to put on an act, of finally being able to let go of the nasty thing he's been carrying around with him for months is indescribable. Sure, he'd been pissed, but he'd mostly just missed her.

"And I wasn't just avoiding you," says Kouyou, wiping the last of her tears away. He's not even surprised how quickly she puts herself back together, it just makes him smile wider. "I'm practically running on fumes most days. I greatly underestimated how much work a Port Mafia Records executive does. Mori makes it look so easy. But the person I took over for left a huge mess, and I'm been trying to clean it up for months."

"I know you haven't been working on any music," says Chuuya. The admission that he's been keeping track of Kouyou comes easily now. "What do they have you doing?"

"PMR is largely able to function as it does because of its relationships and partnerships with others. I've been put in charge of fostering and developing those relationships, which is no small task," explains Kouyou, shifting into her business persona, the one that had earned her the title of executive at such a young age. "Every person wants something from us, and we want something from them, and it's a battle of who is going to give up less."

"You love it," says Chuuya, hearing it in her voice.

Kouyou pauses for a moment, then smiles slightly, an admission he's not wrong. "I suppose I find it rewarding when I manage to get what I need from someone and give up nothing in return. The look on people's faces when they realize it is something."

"Don't you miss music?" asks Chuuya. He's not sure he could ever dive into just the business side of PMR. It sounds constricting.

"I enjoy music and singing, but I wasn't given many other options of what to do with my life. I have been locked into that role since I was fourteen. Having more breathing room has been a nice change of pace," says Kouyou, leaning back in her chair. "I like creating music a great deal, and I wouldn't want to work in another industry, but I don't feel about it the same way you do. You love it more than anyone I've ever met. It's clear from the album."

“Do you, uh, like the album?” asks Chuuya, clearly nervous. He looks off to the side so it’s hopefully less obvious.

Kouyou laughs, which makes him turn back to face her. “Chuuya, it’s a masterpiece. Everyone thinks so. I’m surprised you still have doubts about it.”

“I don’t care what *everyone* thinks,” says Chuuya, raising a brow.

“I think it’s sensational, a work of art,” says Kouyou. It hits differently than most of the other praise he’s gotten. For all that they’ve been estranged, this is his *mentor*. “The first time I heard *Corruption*, I had never been more proud. You’ve come so far from that little street punk you were when you walked in here.”

Chuuya feels himself flush, and tries to fight off his embarrassment. “I wasn’t that bad,” protests Chuuya. “And I wouldn’t have made it where I am without your help.”

Kouyou lights up at the praise. It gives Chuuya the push to say, “I know you’re busy, but our first show is in L.A. If you could find some way to be there, it would mean a lot to me.”

“Then I’ll be there,” declares Kouyou easily. As if she hadn’t just explained how short on time she was.

“You will?” asks Chuuya, not able to hold back his huge grin.

“Of course,” says Kouyou. She doesn’t smile back, but the happiness is clear from her eyes. “I owe you a concert after all of mine that you’ve sat through.”

They sit in silence for a moment. But Chuuya doesn’t want to leave yet. It’s been ages since he’d gotten the chance to talk to Kouyou. There’s so much he wants to tell her. He doesn’t know where to start though. Kouyou takes the lead luckily.

“How are the tour preparations coming?” she asks.

“Mostly good. That Count guy is kind of a jackass,” says Chuuya, automatically frowning at the thought of him.

Kouyou smirks a bit, her version of a chuckle. “I had heard you two didn’t get on. He’s a bit abrasive, but he’s very good at what he does. He helped me a lot with becoming less awkward on stage.”

Chuuya is taken aback by that. “I’ve never seen you be the slightest bit awkward while performing.”

“You didn’t know me when I was fourteen,” says Kouyou, shrugging slightly. “Not everyone takes to the stage like you, Chuuya.”

Chuuya is not used to dealing with this much direct praise from Kouyou. “Dazai thinks he’s annoying too,” he says. Kouyou’s face tightens strangely at the words.

“About Dazai,” says Kouyou hesitantly. “Are you sure you know what you’re getting into there?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” asks Chuuya, eyes narrowing sharply. He feels his body tighten. He straightens up from where he was leaning against the desk.

“He’s a slippery one, Chuuya,” says Kouyou. She folds her arms across her chest and gives him a serious look. “He’s almost as good an actor as he is a singer. I wouldn’t want you to fall for one of his schemes and end up caught off guard.”

Chuuya has to bite back a harsh reply. He knows that Dazai is more than capable of sticking up for himself, but ever since Chuuya had showed him the ugliest parts of himself and Dazai had basically responded *yeah so what?* Chuuya has become fiercely protective over him. Chuuya would walk on razor blades for that fucker. He knows that Kouyou probably means well, but he isn’t going to sit here and let her talk about him like that.

(If you had told him a year ago that in a conflict between Kouyou and Dazai he would be taking *Dazai’s* side, he would have laughed in your fucking face.)

“I know Dazai,” says Chuuya shortly. “I know what he’s like. I can tell when he’s faking. I’ll be fine.” He makes it clear from his tone that the matter is not up for discussion.

“Just be careful, Chuuya,” says Kouyou, shaking her head a bit. The annoyance flows out of Chuuya. It’s been so long since he’s had Kouyou looking out for him, he’d forgotten what it felt like. It soothes him, and he lets go of the tension he’d felt since she’d said Dazai’s name.

“I will,” promises Chuuya. He doesn’t sit back down though, looking to the side at Kouyou’s kettle. “Um, is that tea still on the table?”

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### **Mid-March, One and a Half Months Since the Release of Corruption**

There’s a frantic sort of energy in the air. It’s affecting everyone around them. A constant stream of people are rushing around doing last minute sound and lighting adjustments. The wardrobe people are still fussing over his hair, running fingers through it to get the look they’re going for.

Chuuya lets the man in front of him adjust his bangs so they lay over his face in the style they want, even if it’s kind of annoying. It’ll be useless once he starts playing and sweating, but he’s not going to try to stop him. Chuuya really only cares about the music anyway.

It does feel a little odd to be out of a suit. He’s wearing a pair of black leather pants that are surprisingly comfortable for how tight they are with a white t-shirt and a light red jacket, and then another black jacket over that (he would also question the point of wearing two fucking jackets). He gets to wear his usual choker and he’d refused to take off Arthur’s hat. It feels good to have him close somehow tonight.

Dazai is completely calm next to him. He’s still in a suit though, a simple black one with a white shirt and black tie. His bandages peak out from his sleeves and collar. Chuuya’s not

sure if anyone had tried to get him to take them off, but if they had it hadn't worked.

Dazai's eyes stand out more lined with the makeup they're both wearing. Chuuya had used to wear this kind of stuff when he played with The Sheep, but he's never seen Dazai wear anything on his face. He looks annoyingly good, the perfect mix of young rock star mixed with teenage pop singer they're supposed to be.

The man adjusting his hair finally finishes and Chuuya adjusts the mic in his ear again as he steps away. He can hear the hum of the crowd beyond the room they're getting ready in. The noise of so many people waiting for them makes something in his blood sing. Chuuya has been on edge practically all day, and now that the moment is finally almost here he's even more impatient.

His twitchiness catches Dazai's attention. "Nervous, chibi?" asks Dazai. Dazai doesn't look nervous at all, not that Chuuya ever really sees him look nervous. He ignores the people rushing around them and adjusting things.

"Not at all, mackerel," says Chuuya. He probably looks it, but the fidgeting is anticipation. He hasn't played a show in ages, and he's missed it. Chuuya loves music in all its forms, but there's something about it live that makes it so much sharper. The rush he gets from being on stage is one of the best feelings he's ever had.

"Then stop acting like a dog trying to sit still while their master waves a bone in front of them," says Dazai, smirking a little. "You're embarrassing me."

Chuuya rolls his eyes and throws a punch, but Dazai surprises him by catching his fist against his chest. He doesn't let go immediately, and Chuuya looks over to meet his eyes. Dazai looks back, raising a brow. His expression says all of the things that he won't say out loud, that he's just as eager as Chuuya, that he's right there with him, that he's got his back.

Chuuya scoffs at the gesture. Though he appreciates it, it's unnecessary. He already knows all that. He smirks at Dazai, not trying to pull back his hand.

"We're ready for you," announces Hirotsu, appearing next to them. He also appears completely calm in all the chaos, a veteran to the madness by now.

Dazai gives Chuuya's fist a last squeeze then pushes it away roughly, taking his spot near the edge of the stage where he's supposed to enter from. Chuuya gets into position too, clenching and unclenching his hands until he gets the signal from the stage hand that he's on. Chuuya nods and walks on stage without any hesitation, a huge smile already on his face. The audience roars as he comes into view, and then gets even louder when Dazai appears as well, coming from the other side of the stage.

"Hello, Los Angeles," says Chuuya into his mic, strolling to the center of the stage. "How's everyone doing tonight?" He pauses for their cheers. He can see their band settling into position in their various place. "Thank you so much for coming out to see us. My name is Chuuya Nakahara, and this idiot is Osamu Dazai."

“You’re the idiot,” says Dazai blithely, walking over so he’s closer to the center of the stage as well. The crowd laughs at his statement, clearly eating it up (and fuck you, Yoshii, they clearly know how to put on a show).

Chuuya rolls his eyes but doesn’t react otherwise. “And we’re Double Black. It’s incredible to be able to play our first show at home in L.A. We wouldn’t want to start anywhere else.”

“Chuuya talks too much,” says Dazai, raising one hand over his mouth, pretending to talk to the crowd as if Chuuya can’t hear him. He takes his hand away and turns to speak to Chuuya. “These people aren’t here to listen to your sappy speeches. Let’s get to the music, shall we?”

Chuuya huffs, but the huge smile on his face gives him away. Dazai’s matching much smaller grin is like a fire under his skin. They haven’t even started playing yet, and this is already better than any show he ever did with The Sheep. “Fine,” says Chuuya, feigning impatience, flashing a signal to the band that they’re ready to start. “Here’s *Rain Beyond the Window*.”

The band starts to play the opening notes of the song, and Chuuya gets the adrenaline rush that seems cheaper coming from anything other than a stage. “*Another day of morning rain,*” sings Chuuya, reaching out his left arm towards the crowd. “*I don’t recall the last time I saw the sun.*”

“*The rain seems to be the only thing that doesn’t have an end,*” sings Dazai, voice as clear and flawless as ever. He strolls along the stage, bringing a hand to his heart (dramatically, but it works). “*Although can something truly end if it never had begun?*”

Chuuya has always found the concept of stage fright to be odd, there has never been anywhere he feels safer than here, singing the songs they’d written together, with people *singing along* (which he’s never had the thrill of experiencing before). He looks quickly to the side and catches sight of Kouyou, though she’s too far away to see properly.

Sometimes he has moments where he wonders if he wouldn’t have been better off having the same fate as his mom. But that feeling has never been further away than now.

*This is going to be fucking awesome*, he thinks to himself as he leans towards Dazai to start the chorus together. “*All I see is rain beyond the window.*”

“This is not going to be like Kouyou’s tour,” says Hirotsu, walking next to him towards the hotel’s elevator. They enter and he presses the button for the top floor. “I’m serious. I allowed you two a great deal of leniency back then because you weren’t involved in the operations of the tour. But now that you’re the artists, you are not going to have the freedom you did.”

Chuuya barely manages to hold back a sigh. Hirotsu has been lecturing him since they left the show. They’ve gone from L.A. to San Diego, so this is their first real night on tour. Dazai

had somehow disappeared after the show, probably to avoid this very lecture, which is almost more irritating than having to listen to Hirotsu blather on. They reach their floor and Chuuya leads the way towards the room number listed on his key, Hirotsu following behind him.

“Port Mafia Records has entrusted you with a lot of responsibility,” continues Hirotsu, not deterred by Chuuya’s lack of response. “We are going to have a jammed pack schedule and it is air tight. So we do not have any time for your and Dazai’s shenanigans.”

Chuuya flashes the key against the lock, holding the door open for Hirotsu once the light turns green. The older man nods in thanks as he enters, still speaking (though Chuuya kind of tunes him out). Chuuya looks around the room as he walks inside. A comfy looking king bed dominates the space. The view out the window is spectacular, he can see the ocean clearly in the moonlight. This is quite the upgrade from his hotel rooms from the last tour. There’s practically a mini living room in here. Chuuya is kind of used to luxury from PMR at this point, but it brings a smile to his face anyway. Until his gaze returns to the fact that there is one bed.

“Chuuya, are you even listening to me?” asks Hirotsu, making him look back at him. He’s frowning at him in a very familiar way.

“Kind of,” says Chuuya honestly, half shrugging. He sits on the edge of the bed. He’s tired from playing and the hours of meet and greets they’d done before the show.

Hirotsu lets out a large sigh, which is also familiar. “Well, rest up. I’ll email you the itinerary for the week. Do you know where Dazai is?”

Almost as if summoned, the hotel room door opens with enough force it smashes into the wall, which Chuuya has no doubt was on purpose. Dazai strolls into the room, hands in his pockets, a wide smile in place. He’s back in his normal clothes, and his hair looks damp. Chuuya is even more annoyed that he’d gotten to shower while Chuuya has been forced to sit here in his sweaty concert clothes and listen to Hirotsu.

“Whoopsie. I always misjudge my own strength,” says Dazai, smiling widely at both of them.

“Where have you been?” asks Chuuya, rolling his eyes. He’s not the least bit surprised the Dazai managed to get a key to Chuuya’s room with little effort.

“Dazai, what perfect timing,” says Hirotsu, eyeing the wall the door crashed into with a scowl. “I was just telling Chuuya about how we do *not* have an unlimited hotel damages budget this time around.”

“You mean I missed part of your lecture?” asks Dazai, fake pouting. The obnoxiousness pulls a small snort out of Chuuya that he tries to cover up. Dazai walks over to sit on the bed next to him, giving him a less than subtle wink.

“You two,” starts Hirotsu before taking a deep breath. “We can discuss it in the morning. We have an early start tomorrow. I expect neither of you will look sleep deprived.”

At that, Hirotsu turns to leave. Chuuya calls out a goodbye, while Dazai doesn't say anything. He pulls his legs up on the bed so he's sitting cross-legged, facing Chuuya.

"I don't think I've ever been told to get a good night's sleep with such disdain before," says Dazai, smirking a bit. Then he looks around the room and his smile slips. "Apparently, artists who headline tours aren't forced to share rooms to save money."

"I noticed," says Chuuya, keeping his tone neutral. He and Dazai had slept apart since they'd gotten back from the last tour, although if Dazai had stayed over and heard Chuuya from the living room he would come wake him up. The bed had been too small for two people, but they'd played video games or listened to music as a distraction, or Dazai had dragged some blankets and slept on his floor a few nights.

It had been pretty rare though. He hadn't been having as many nightmares after he stopped trying to write *Arahabaki* and finished *Corruption*. Also with Dazai farther away or sleeping at his own place, sometimes he just slept through them. But now that he's back to playing *Corruption* almost every day, they've ramped up again. Chuuya hadn't mentioned anything to Dazai about it, and he hadn't been planning to.

"This won't do. We'll need connecting rooms. In case we need to discuss music," says Dazai, voice so confident that if Chuuya didn't know him, he would have no idea he's lying.

"Of course," agrees Chuuya easily, not bothering to hide how grateful that makes him. He would never ask Dazai to do this for him, but that he's willing to relieve Chuuya of a tension he didn't even know he had.

"I'll let Hirotsu know. But I'm staying in here tonight," announces Dazai, laying down to stretch out on the bed. He smiles at Chuuya like he knows exactly how much he appreciates it without him having to say anything. "You have a much better view out your window."

"I'm not stopping you," says Chuuya, standing up and heading towards the bathroom. "I'm going to take a shower. Don't ditch me with Hirotsu again, asshole."

Hirotsu had been right when he said it wasn't going to be like Kouyou's tour. For one thing, whenever him and Dazai are't on stage, they're still required to be somewhere. They do countless interviews and appearances. If they're not being interviewed, they're doing a signing or taking pictures. If they're not doing any of that, they're stuck on a bus or a plane. It's only been a couple weeks, but Chuuya is already finding it a little stuffy.

They're in another interview now, and Chuuya is bored out of his mind. It's not the interviewer's fault. They just always seem to ask the same questions over and over again, and none of them are very interesting.



Chuuya hadn't enjoyed media training, but he'd sat through all of it. It had actually been useful. He knows how to avoid questions he doesn't want to answer, how to give a good sound bite for TV or the radio. He also knows how important maintaining a good public image is to the success of the album. He doesn't resent having to spend so much time being interviewed.

He does kind of resent when the interviewers spend barely any time talking about the music.

"Are either of you dating anyone?" asks the female radio host who's show they're on. Nora Roberts, that was her name. Chuuya meets so many people every day it's hard to keep track of them all (at least it is for him, Dazai is infuriatingly good at it).

Chuuya laughs, genuinely but keeping it friendly. "When, exactly, do you think we have the time while headlining a tour to date someone?"

"So you're both single?" asks Nora, a hint of mischief in her voice.

"Yes, we're both single," says Chuuya, still keeping his tone light. Dazai rolls his eyes besides him. Chuuya kicks him underneath the table.

"What do you look for in a partner?" Nora doesn't seem to notice their lack of interest in the topic, or she just doesn't care (Chuuya would honestly respect her more if it was the later).

"I don't know, good taste in music," offers Chuuya weakly.

"This is boring," declares Dazai, voice whiny. "Ask me questions about Chuuya and Chuuya questions about me," he suggests.

Nora is flustered for a moment but seems to take it in stride. "Alright then. Well, we'll start with an easy one. Chuuya, what is Dazai's favorite food?"

"Dazai likes anything sweet, but his favorite food is canned crab," answers Chuuya easily, not hiding how gross he thinks the choice is in his voice.

Dazai shows a flicker of surprise, and Chuuya has to fight off a laugh. Dazai might be more observant than Chuuya, but Chuuya puts in ten times the effort. Plus the guy keeps hoards of the stuff in his apartment.

Nora smiles, before turning to Dazai. "Dazai, what is Chuuya's favorite hobby?"

"Chuuya spends almost all of his time on music," says Dazai confidently. "He's obsessed with it. If he's not writing or singing it himself, he's listening to other people's." Dazai shrugs and adds, "But I guess outside of music his favorite hobby is video games. Not that he's very good at them."

"I literally kicked your ass this morning," says Chuuya before he can help himself. It had been the highlight of his day, beating Dazai at the zombie fighting game while they were on the bus.

"Fluke," says Dazai breezily.

Chuuya tries to kick him again under the table, but Dazai moves his legs out of the way. Chuuya barely avoids falling out of his chair.

Nora laughs, amused rather than annoyed. Or maybe she'd just expected it, this has kind of become what they're known for. "Banter" as Hirotsu calls it, Chuuya calls it "the only way I can survive Dazai's bullshit." Dazai finds it all incredibly amusing.

"What is Dazai's favorite song?" asks Nora, directing the question at Chuuya again.

Chuuya groans. "Dazai is seriously the most picky person on the planet when it comes to music. He barely likes anything," complains Chuuya. "He does like Natsume Soseki and Murasaki Shikibu though."

It's more than a flicker of surprise this time. Dazai looks a little impressed even. He quickly hides it though. "When you spend as much time as I do listening to music, you tend to be more selective," says Dazai, smoothly covering up how judgmental he is.

"We just have time for a couple more questions," says Nora, eyes flicking down to her list of questions. "This is something a lot of your fans wonder about. You two both have such a unique look. What is the origin of the hat and the bandages?"

"The hat was a gift," says Chuuya, answering the first part quickly but normally, but then changing his tone to a much colder one, "As for the other part, pass."

"So you're still answering for each other then?" asks Nora, trying to make a joke out of it.

"I said fucking pass," says Chuuya sharply, not backing down. He glares at the older woman, and she seems startled at the reaction.

"Why would you want to know more about Chuuya's hat anyway?" asks Dazai, trying to cut the tension in the room. "It's so ugly. Really, it should be burned. You shouldn't encourage him."

"I'm afraid that's all the time we have for today," says Nora, though her tone is slightly strained. She recovers quickly though, sounding composed again. "Thank you both so much for coming here and being on the show."

"It was our pleasure," says Dazai, voice light and smiling widely.

"Yeah, thanks," says Chuuya, trying to do the same but not pulling it off as well.

"And now let's hear some of the album no one can stop talking about," says Nora. "Here's Double Black with *Corruption*."

Nora hits a button and the sound of Chuuya's voice fills the space with *Oh grantors of dark disgrace* before Nora flicks another switch and silences it from the recording booth.

Dazai stands up, reaching over to shake Nora's hand and thank her again. Chuuya does the same (because he's a fucking professional, damn it). Neither of them say anything to each other as they walk to the car and get in the backseat. Hirotsu stays behind to say his own

thank you, which now probably involves an apology (Chuuya is *not* sorry). The driver must also still be with Hirotsu.

“All this time I thought you were a sheepdog,” says Dazai tightly, breaking the silence, “But it turns out you’re a guard dog who has to attack when its master is threatened.”

Chuuya turns to glare at him. “Are you ever going to give it a rest with the fucking dog jokes?” he snaps.

“I can fight my own battles,” says Dazai flatly. His eyes are cold as he looks at Chuuya.

“I should hope so,” says Chuuya, scoffing. “That wasn’t a battle, that was some small time radio host who cared more about our love lives than our music. She can fuck off.”

“You’ve never asked about them,” says Dazai after a long pause, voice carefully blank of emotion.

“Are you trying to ask me something, Dazai?” asks Chuuya, turning to give him a blank look of his own.

“Just making an observation,” says Dazai, voice still emotionless, but his hand twitches a bit at his side.

“Well, keep your shitty comments to yourself,” says Chuuya, turning to look out the window. “We’ve got a million more of these stupid ass interviews.”

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## **April, Two Months Since the Release of Corruption**

No matter what happens in the time in between, no matter how pissed Chuuya is at Dazai, it all fades away the second they’re on stage together. It’s inescapable. Chuuya has tried to maintain his anger, but it never lasts. The second Dazai’s voice blends with his in their first harmony, it always slips away.

All of the other bullshit they put up with for the tour is worth it when he’s on stage. He can even suffer through playing *Corruption* night after night if it means he gets to have this. He can deal with the constant nightmares if he gets to feel this alive when he plays.

They’re getting to the end of a show in Dallas, Texas. All they have left is *Wake Up Call* and then the encore, *Corruption*. It’s strange how the song is both Chuuya’s favorite and least favorite song to perform. He hates the memories that it dredges up, hates that it makes him dream of free falling through the air while unable to move, his mom’s screams, the last thing he’d ever heard from her, deafening all around him.

But Dazai is there. It’s just them, Chuuya at the piano and Dazai tends to sit on top of it. He’s aware of him throughout the whole thing. The song is also a chance to release his feelings during his solo. They aren’t good feelings, but it is freeing in a way to be able to let them out for once when he spends most of his time avoiding them.

Then when Dazai starts on the bridge, it hits Chuuya the same every time, despite how many times they've played it now. It's like...music is so rarely perfect, and Chuuya doesn't expect it to be, but that moment, it is.

Chuuya is wiping sweat off his face and grabbing a drink of water as Dazai talks to the crowd before they start the next number. He's shed most of his clothes by this point in the show, just wearing a white t-shirt (a high end white t-shirt that had been carefully selected as appropriate by the wardrobe people). Dazai is somehow never as sweaty and is still in a dress shirt and tie.

Chuuya takes one last drink before putting the bottle down, moving over to stand by Dazai.

"And so we're at Ta Prohm, the temple in Cambodia where they filmed Tomb Raider," says Dazai, easily holding the crowd's attention. "And you're obviously not supposed to climb on any of it, there are signs literally everywhere saying that. So the first thing Chuuya does is immediately climb on top of the very first structure we see and yell out, 'Suck my dick, Lara Croft'." Dazai does a very unflattering imitation of Chuuya's voice that is high-pitched and annoying. The audience laughs along with him.

Chuuya rolls his eyes and sighs through his nose, crossing his arms and giving Dazai a deeply unimpressed look. "Are you done?"

"But I haven't even gotten to the part where Chuuya got scared of the monkeys at Angkor Wat," whines Dazai, pouting at Chuuya dramatically.

"First of all, those things could have had rabies, and I was totally justified to avoid them," says Chuuya. "Second, maybe *I* should tell the story about what happened when we were in Thailand."

Dazai straightens up, adjusting his mic. "Anyway, enough of this chatter, let's get back to the show!"

But instead of announcing *Wake Up Call*, he turns to face Chuuya, a calculating expression on his face that instantly puts Chuuya on edge. Dazai only has that look when he's up to something.

"What do you want?" asks Chuuya flatly.

"We're always playing Chuuya's favorite songs," says Dazai innocently. "I think it's only fair that we play one of mine."

They always play the full album during a show, and Chuuya adds a couple of covers to mix it up. They play a lot of things from other PMR artists, Kouyou in particular. Or they'll play old classics like *To Kill A Mockingbird* or *The Catcher in The Rye*. Dazai has never had any input besides shooting down suggestions, he's never given any of his own.

"That's because *I* ask the band in advance and made sure everyone knows it," says Chuuya. Dazai didn't even have favorite songs, Chuuya barely sees him react to other people's music. The highest praise he's heard him give a song is "alright, not great."

“Oh, don’t worry about that,” says Dazai, waving a hand dismissively. “I made a recording that we can sing along to!” Dazai’s innocent facade changes into a smirk.

Chuuya’s eye widen as he understand what he means. “You didn’t.”

Dazai shoots finger guns towards the left side of the stage, signaling someone, and the track starts. It’s not even The Sheep playing, which means Dazai must have recorded himself playing all of the parts and put it together. He must have been plotting this for a while.

*“It’s a Friday, and it’s been a hell of a week,”* sings Dazai happily, looking right at Chuuya.

Chuuya gives in, like always. *“Feels like I’ve been stuck in a losing streak,”* he sings back, smiling wryly. Dazai’s smile grows even wider.

They sing the next lines together, facing each other and swaying back and forth obnoxiously. *“But tonight is the night we turn it around. There’s not a thing that can keep me down.”*

Their eyes meet before the chorus starts. Dazai’s eyebrow raises in a challenge. And Chuuya’s never been one to turn down a challenge, especially from Dazai.

So when the chorus starts they break out in the dance they’d spent hours working on last June. It all instantly comes back. They move completely in sync as the belt out the lyrics.

*So turn down the lights, and turn up the music*

*Tell all your friends, tell everyone*

*Dance ’til your feet are covered in bruises*

*We’ll keep going ’til we see the sun*

They look absolutely ridiculous, and there is no way the crowd in Texas has any idea what song they’re playing, but the audience is screaming and laughing. They cheer as they stomp, slide, and shake across the stage together.

*“Cuz life is better,”* sings Dazai, doing the wave with both his arms.

*“Life’s just better,”* sings Chuuya, spinning around in a full circle dramatically.

*“Life is better, better, better,”* they sing together, jumping with each better.

*“Life’s better with a little party in it,”* sings Dazai lowly, shaking his shoulders.

Chuuya can’t help the laugh that escapes him at the sight. He has to fight to keep it together as Dazai launches into a freestyle dance before the next verse, prancing about the stage. The crowd eats it up, and the energy in the room is infectious.

Chuuya finally gets a hold of himself, still smiling and shaking his head. Dazai's eyes meet his from across the stage. His hair is a mess, a combination of how he'd styled it and sweat from performing. He walks across the platform back towards him with a sort of careless freedom he never has off stage. Dazai looks impossibly pleased, and there's nothing fake about it for once, he's not putting on a show just for the audience. Chuuya can tell it's genuine. He never sees his eyes looking this *alive*.

Suddenly it hits Chuuya all at once. Chuuya wants...well he *wants*. He wants with a desperation that is surprising in its intensity. He tries to dismiss it instantly, but it's overwhelming. He can't look away despite all the feelings he's trying to push down.

But Chuuya has never been in the habit of lying, even to himself. And he'd certainly never been able to lie to himself when it comes to music.

So many memories flash through his mind. All of the times he'd claimed to himself *it's just Dazai*. All of the thoughts that have been lurking underneath the surface for...much longer than he is willing to contemplate right now. It turns out there is no *just* Dazai, actually it being Dazai seems to be the most important component.

Chuuya has always thought Dazai is attractive, even when they were fifteen. He remembers the first time he ever saw him, as a strange dark haired boy looking out of place in a suit. He'd been more concerned about his employer and that he was trouble at the time though. And the attraction had never really gone away, it had just always seemed less important than whatever else was going on.

Fuck, there likely isn't a time where he'd *want* to have this epiphany, but on stage in the middle of a song seems like the worst possible time. *Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck*, he thinks to himself.

This Dazai isn't just attractive right now, he's viciously stunning and ethereal and *human*.

The word hits Chuuya like a bucket of ice cold water being dumped over his head. It cuts off any naive whispers of hope he could have started to consider.

Dazai is his partner, he can't fuck that up. He relies on him too much. He wouldn't have made it through even writing an album without him, let alone everything that has come since. He isn't going to risk the most important person in his life for...for his own selfishness really. Dazai lets him in unlike anyone else, he gives him a sort of unshakeable trust. Chuuya can't ruin that by pushing it into something it's not.

He will not lose him. He can't.

(There is a quiet whisper in the back of his mind that things like him shouldn't play at these types of connections anyway, *everything you touch, you destroy*.)

Luckily, his body is much smarter than his brain and jumps back into the second verse as if nothing has changed, relying more on muscle memory than actively thinking through the steps. He barely misses a beat, quickly losing himself in the obnoxious song again.

By the time they reach the second chorus, the smile on his face when Dazai looks at him is genuine. He can't resist feeling happy, not when he's on stage with Dazai, not when Dazai is this rare version of giddy he hardly ever is.

They finish the song, going over-the-top in the final chorus, voices dragging out the final notes and striking a pose. The crowd claps and screams for them enthusiastically. They might have just caused an uptick in sales for an obscure The Sheep song actually. That's kind of a weird irony, after they'd accused him of only looking out for himself.

Dazai bows and thanks the audience cheerfully, "Yes, thank you, thank you. See, Chuuya, I knew my pick would be a winner." He turns to Chuuya, still grinning widely.

He'll push it down, Chuuya decides. He's got a lifetime of experience of doing that. It's gotten him through everything so far. What was this compared to all that?

Instead, he'll focus on valuing what he *does* have. He smiles back (and if it aches just a little, he'll adjust to that too). "Thanks for humoring him everyone," says Chuuya. "Now let's play a song you guys might know a little better. Here's *Wake Up Call*."

Chuuya wakes up to Dazai gripping his shoulder and shaking it. Chuuya lets out an unsteady breath as he comes to. Fucking shit, this is the third night in a row. They're getting more and more frequent, which is just fucking great because he loves spending his entire day from beginning to end working and then not even being able to sleep. He's rubbing his eyes angrily when Dazai speaks.

"You're been having them more," says Dazai, looking wide awake. He keeps his voice neutral, but there's an edge of tension to it. His hand is lingering on Chuuya's shoulder. "The nightmares."

Chuuya shoves his hand away and barely resists the urge to glare at him. "And?" he asks as coldly as he can. He forces himself to take another deep breath. He doesn't want to have this conversation at all, especially in the middle of the night when he's just woken up from a fucking nightmare.

"There has to be a reason," says Dazai, not picking up on Chuuya's very clear *I do not want to talk about this* signals. Or picking up on them and ignoring them.

"Do I have to fucking spell it out for you?" asks Chuuya, not resisting the urge to glare this time.

"If I had been able to figure it out we wouldn't be having this conversation," says Dazai, dropping the calm act and frowning slightly.

“Do you think playing *Corruption* is fun for me?” asks Chuuya, letting out a bitter laugh. “It’s literally just shoving the worst fucking parts of myself in front of an audience every night. So yes, I’ve been having more nightmares,” says Chuuya, rolling his eyes and looking at his hands where they’re picking at the comforter.

“I’ll get it removed from the set list,” says Dazai after a moment, as if that’s possible. Chuuya thinks he has to be kidding, but he’s completely serious. If anything, he looks determined.

“Oh my god, don’t be an idiot,” says Chuuya, shaking his head. “I’m not tanking our careers just because I’m uncomfortable. It’s fine.”

“What am I supposed to do then?” asks Dazai, he’s dropped the determination for annoyance and perhaps anger. His eyes are narrowed and he’s practically scowling.

“Sleep in the other room if it bothers you that much,” offers Chuuya sarcastically. It’s not his job to make Dazai feel better about *his* nightmares. He turns away to lay back down, adjusting his pillow roughly.

Dazai grabs his shoulder and pulls him back so they’re facing each other again. “Do you think it’s fun for me seeing you like that?” asks Dazai, shocking Chuuya with the amount of emotion in his voice. It’s not just anger, it’s worry, a surprisingly distraught version. “I just want to *do something*.”

“You already do help,” admits Chuuya quietly, looking away to stare at his pillow, still caught in Dazai’s grip. It would be too much to look at Dazai right now. “When you’re here, it helps.”

“It’s not enough,” says Dazai, voice quiet too. It makes something clench tightly in Chuuya’s gut.

“It is for me. It’s more than I’ve ever had before,” says Chuuya, looking up again to smile at Dazai sadly. “You can’t fix me, Dazai.”

“There’s nothing fucking wrong with you,” says Dazai, voice harsh. Dazai almost never swears, which makes it all the more jarring when he does.

*You’re wrong*, he says back in his mind. He doesn’t argue though, he knows it won’t get them anywhere. He slips his hand up to grab Dazai’s from his shoulder, slowly intertwining their fingers.

Dazai’s breathing shifts for a moment, but he doesn’t protest. All of the anger seems to fade from him. He lays back down slowly, not releasing Chuuya’s hand. He nudges Chuuya over so that they can share the same pillow. It’s not the best position for sleeping, but neither of them pull away until they fall back asleep.

When he wakes up the next morning, Dazai is already awake, as usual. Chuuya can hear him typing on his laptop in the other hotel room through the open door. Despite their jam-packed tour schedule Dazai still finds the time to keep up with all the projects he’d been working on before they’d left, claiming he didn’t want other people to take over and ruin them (Chuuya



thinks it's just because he's a control freak). There's a mug of tea waiting for him on the TV stand, which makes him smile. He drinks it as he gets ready for the day.

They don't discuss it any further. Dazai tends to hover around Chuuya more during *Corruption* though. He's always leaning or sitting on the piano, his focus solely on him. Chuuya isn't sure how Dazai had felt about playing the song before, but now there's an element of unease that hadn't been there previously. It's odd how Dazai's discomfort makes him feel somewhat better about his own.

Dazai had rarely ever slept in the adjoining room during the tour so far. It had only really happened in the beginning of the tour when they had argued about something after a show. Then when his nightmares had started ramping up Dazai abandoned the other room completely. He hadn't even bothered with excuses anymore, he just automatically went to bed on the opposite side of Chuuya.

Now he no longer sleeps on the other side. He's always flinging his legs or an arm over Chuuya, bandages pressing into Chuuya's body. It's like he's trying to remind Chuuya that he's there with him without saying the words. That if Chuuya can feel him against him physically, it shows he's not alone.

Chuuya presses into the contact, soaking in the offered comfort reverentially (even though he probably shouldn't). The nightmares don't go away, but they seem easier to face like this.

"I've been told the two of you are a difficult interview," says the reporter, Nicholas Sparks, sitting on an armchair across from them. They're lounging on a couch backstage, still hours from doing the show and doing press in the downtime.

"Should he be telling us this?" Chuuya asks Dazai, facing him instead of the reporter.

"You have a way of derailing the conversation and not answering any of the questions," says Nicholas Sparks (Chuuya can't *believe* that isn't a fake name), no confidence lost.

"I feel like he shouldn't be telling us this," replies Dazai to Chuuya, facing away as well.

"The two of you are both rather young," says Nicholas, raising his voice slightly, which is an interesting tactic to gain their attention at least. "In fact, a lot of the artists Port Mafia Records sign tend to be under eighteen. Some people speculate that PMR is taking advantage of children, trapping them in contracts before they're old enough to know better. What do you think of those accusations?"

"PMR gave me the first stable situation in my life," says Chuuya calmly, despite how the question makes him furious. "Ryuuro Hirotsu, in addition to being a close personal friend, is my legal guardian. I don't trust anyone more to look out for my best interests. I have a place

to live, food, anything I could need. PMR even made sure I got my GED. Frankly, they did more for me than the foster care system ever did.”

Chuuya doesn't hide the fact that he used to be in foster care from the world. Mori had offered it as an option, but Chuuya had turned him down. He doesn't care if people know. It's not that hard to find the information, and Chuuya would rather be open about it anyway. People don't usually use the knowledge to be suck a dick about it though.

“My parents know and approve of my career,” says Dazai simply. Chuuya quickly looks over at him before looking away, not getting caught in that trap of previously unknown information.

“So neither of you has any problems with the negative reputation and rumors that surround Port Mafia Records?” asks Nicholas, just the edge of a smile visible.

“PMR has never been anything other than good to us,” says Chuuya, smiling too but not kindly at all. “And rumors are just that, rumors.”

“Port Mafia Records is lucky to have such faithful artists,” says Nicholas, tone clearly mocking.

Chuuya doesn't care how many stupid readers the man has, he's ready to wipe off his stupid smirk with his fist but Dazai speaks up first.

“Actually, we're not a difficult interview,” says Dazai, and Nicholas may be older but no one does mocking better than Dazai. “We've just had media training so that others can't try and take advantage of us just because we're young. We're not answering your questions because they were clearly listed in the things not to ask about in the prep document I know PMR gave you. So you either read it and ignored it or didn't even read it, both of which seem unprofessional.”

“You're a child,” says Nicholas, trying to sound dismissive, but his face has turned visibly red. Chuuya wonders if it's anger or embarrassment. “What would you know about being professional?”

“I am much younger than you,” says Dazai, smiling serenely, “But look at who's doing better in their respective field.”

The reporter's face tightens and he scowls deeply. “Thank you for your time,” he says tightly. He stands up to leave and doesn't wait for them to respond.

“No, thank you,” calls out Dazai to his retreating form.

“Thanks, Sparky,” says Chuuya, and is delighted when the man stumbles a bit but keeps walking.

“What a dick,” says Chuuya. He adjusts so he's lying against the arm of the couch, legs stretched out and caging Dazai in. Dazai nods and rearranges too, lying against the other arm. They're quiet for a moment with their newfound free time.

“Street fighter?” asks Chuuya.

“Street fighter,” agrees Dazai.

They both pull out their phones and begin trying to virtually destroy the other.

Chuuya spends the majority of every day (and every night) with Dazai. They do all of their appearances together, every interview together, every meet and greet together. Chuuya even enjoys the time he gets to himself. He likes to grab lunch with Hirotsu, mess around on the drums with Tachihara, or rarely his and Kouyou's schedules will line up so he gets to catch up with her.

The point is that it doesn't make sense that he misses Dazai.

This tour is just so different from the last one. They're over a month in and the lack of freedom is starting to get to him. He sometimes forgets what state they're even in, that's how little time they get to spend seeing things. Not to mention that so many of them are landlocked, which is a concept that Chuuya hadn't considered all that hard until he was faced with it. Who would want to live where there wasn't any water? Luckily they're back on the coast now, even though he greatly prefers the West coast.

“What's got you so mopey?” asks Dazai. He's gathering up the last of his things that are spread out in the hotel room and packing them up. They're leaving Miami today for Tampa, or maybe it's Orlando. It's all blending together.

Chuuya is laying on the bed in his suit, sprawled out. He supposes he is moping. He sits up to look at Dazai.

“It just sucks, you know? Last time we were on tour we actually got to fucking do things,” says Chuuya, frustration clear in his voice. “I hate having every second of the day planned out. We barely get to even see any of the places we go to.”

“That sounds borderline ungrateful, slug,” says Dazai, smirking at him. “Not what I'd expect from PMR's most loyal.”

“Shut up,” says Chuuya flatly. He scoots forward to get off the bed, grabbing his own stuff that he'd already packed. “So you aren't even a little stir crazy?”

Dazai shrugs. “I expected it to be mostly boring.”

Chuuya rolls his eyes. He should have expected that from Dazai. He leads the way out of the hotel room, not holding the door open behind him and letting it smack into Dazai. The little squeak Dazai lets out makes him laugh at least. They head out for another full day of travel and being Double Black. Chuuya figures the subject has been dismissed.

Then the next morning Chuuya wakes up to Dazai shaking him, which would be normal if not for the fact that he is for once not having a nightmare. It's clearly still very early from the pink light still visible in the room.

"What the fuck?" asks Chuuya, still half asleep.

"Come on, chibi," says Dazai, sounding completely awake. "Get dressed."

"It's only," Chuuya pauses to check his phone, "Fucking five thirty in the morning. We don't have to be up for hours. I know you can function on zero sleep, but not all of us can."

Dazai sighs and grabs Chuuya's hand, pulling him roughly into a sitting position. "I thought you wanted a chance to *do* things."

That wakes Chuuya up significantly. "What sort of things?"

"You won't know if you don't get up," taunts Dazai. He laughs as Chuuya shoves him away.

Chuuya gets out of bed. Dazai's already laid out clothes for him. Normally he'd snap at him for going through his stuff, but he's too curious right now. The clothes are simple, jeans and a black t-shirt. He eyes the purple ball cap sitting there.

"Your hair is too flashy and your ugly hat even more so," says Dazai, shoving the hat on his head.

Chuuya rolls his eyes, adjusting the hat so it's more comfortable. He could mention that Dazai's bandages are way more distinct than anything he wears. Dazai seems to be trying to cover them up under a white long sleeve (seriously, how does he never get hot?).

He follows Dazai out of the hotel room, who still won't tell him where they're going. They take the elevator down to the main floor. Dazai leads the way out of the hotel, avoiding interacting with anyone in the lobby with ease.

They walk for at least ten minutes. Chuuya stops asking Dazai where they're going (because he obviously won't answer anyway) and just enjoys being outside. He's still too tired for real conversation. It's already warm out despite being so early, but it's still pleasant. The city is quiet for the most part. There's some activity around them though, businesses starting to open up and people on their way to work.

Eventually Dazai pulls him into an old looking diner on a corner. Chuuya doesn't catch the name of it before they walk inside, a bell dingling overhead when they open the door. The place is fairly small. They're surprisingly not the only people there. A couple of older men are seated at the counter drinking coffee and there's a woman by herself eating a huge stack of pancakes on the other side.

Chuuya is still taking it all in when Dazai takes his arm and drags him into a booth, one of the only ones not in front of a window. Chuuya settles down into his seat, still looking around at the place.

A waitress comes out of the back room and up to their table right away, putting down two menus. “Morning, darlings,” she says in a slight southern accent. Her name tag reads Annabeth. “Can I get y’all something to drink?”

Chuuya opens the menu, looking for the beverages. “Do you guys have tea?”

“Sweet tea?” asks Annabeth. Chuuya frowns, why do these people have to ruin tea with gobs of sugar?

“He’ll take a water,” says Dazai, rolling his eyes. “And I’ll do a coffee and a water.”

“Sure thing,” says Annabeth, smiling at them before heading back into the kitchen.

“I could have gotten a coffee,” says Chuuya.

“I’ll get you one of your extravagant grass drinks later,” says Dazai, flipping through the menu. “I don’t want to deal with your complaining. Of all the things to be a snob about, you pick tea.”

Chuuya snorts and starts to read the menu himself. It’s standard breakfast food. There’s eggs, waffles, pancakes. The front of the menu identifies the place as The Sunshine Diner, fitting and generic for Florida.

Annabeth returns with their drinks, placing them in front of them. “Are you two ready to order or do you need a couple minutes?”

“I’ll take the pancakes,” says Chuuya. They’d looked pretty good on the girl’s plate at the counter. “And a side of hash browns.”

“I’ll do the waffles,” says Dazai.

“Whipped cream?” asks Annabeth, taking their menus.

“Oh yeah,” says Dazai, smiling widely. Annabeth smiles back. Chuuya rolls his eyes. Of course Dazai would get something vaguely dessert-like.

“Okay, I’ll put the order in,” says Annabeth. “Shouldn’t be too long.”

Chuuya thanks her. He turns to Dazai once she walks away. “So?”

“So?” repeats Dazai, leaning back in the booth and crossing his arms.

“You get a sudden craving for diner food?” asks Chuuya. He leans his elbow on the table, propping his head against his hand.

“Chibi said he was feeling confined,” says Dazai, which is not actually what Chuuya said, but kind of what he meant. “So I decided to take my dog out for a walk.”

“And your solution is this?” Chuuya gestures to the restaurant around them, the worn out booth they’re sitting in, the chipped sun paintings on the wall.

“*This* place opens at 5:30AM, is generally pretty quiet, and its average customer is over 65,” says Dazai. He puts a disgusting amount of sugar in his coffee before taking a sip.

Chuuya gets what he means then. It’s the kind of place where they’re highly unlikely to get recognized. It’s a chance for them to get outside and just be themselves for a little bit. Dazai had figured out exactly what Chuuya really wanted, for them to get to be alone together and have some fucking breathing room without any expectations.

Chuuya laughs, not even surprised Dazai is able to read him so well. The only thing that does surprise him is when Dazai had the time yesterday to find this place. Kouyou hadn’t been wrong about him, he *is* slippery. But he *likes* that about him, especially when he uses it to go behind Chuuya’s back to do things for him like this.

(Ideally, he is supposed to becoming *less* attached to Dazai, less fixated. It’s not fucking working so far.)

Chuuya takes a sip of his water, relaxing into his own seat. Dazai continues to drink his coffee quietly across from him.

“My mom used to like places like this,” says Chuuya, voice carefully casual. Dazai freezes with his coffee halfway to his face. “She hated chain restaurants. She was big into supporting weird local places.”

“We can leave,” offers Dazai slowly, coffee still in midair.

“No,” says Chuuya, shaking his head. “I didn’t mean it as a bad thing. She wasn’t...I liked going to places like this with her.”

Dazai sets his coffee down, it thunks loudly against the table. “I’m going to say something terrible.”

“Since when has that ever stopped you, mackerel?” asks Chuuya, smiling at him.

“I hate your mother,” says Dazai, with the kind of hatred Chuuya has only ever seen him display towards Mori, and this may actually surpass that. “I’m not sorry she’s dead. If she wasn’t, I’d kill her myself.”

“That’s...yeah, that’s pretty terrible,” agrees Chuuya. It’s probably fucked up that it makes Chuuya so pleased. He takes another drink of his water.

“You’ve never asked about my family,” says Dazai, looking down at the table instead of at Chuuya.

Chuuya sighs, he’d thought he’d made himself clear on this. But he can say it out loud if he needs to. “If you have something to tell me, you’ll tell me.”

“You’re not the slightest bit curious?” asks Dazai. He looks up to give Chuuya a searching look.

“I am very fucking curious, which you know,” says Chuuya, shrugging. “But I know better than to try to pry something out of you when you’re not willing.”

“They’re not bad people, per se,” says Dazai after a moment. Chuuya keeps his face blank, open to whatever Dazai is willing to give. “They just weren’t really cut out to be parents.”

“Funny how often that seems to happen,” says Chuuya. He half-snorts bitterly. “Do you still talk to them?”

“Only when absolutely necessary,” says Dazai. He shuffles a bit in his seat. “Legal documents, that sort of thing. We all prefer it that way.”

“Hmm. Sounds like they suck,” says Chuuya.

“An apt description,” says Dazai, laughing a little.

The slight tension is broken with Annabeth reappears from the kitchen with their food. The stack of pancakes is even bigger than he thought and Dazai’s waffles are topped with heaps of whipped cream and strawberries.

“There you boys go,” says Annabeth. “Can I get y’all anything else?”

“No, thanks, this is great,” says Chuuya, already pouring syrup on his pancakes. He hadn’t even been that hungry when they’d walked in, but now he’s excited.

“Well just holler if you need something,” says Annabeth, going to check on the girl at the counter and refill the older men’s coffees.

Chuuya had figured the subject was closed, so he’s surprised when Dazai speaks up again in between bites of his waffle. “My parents shoved me into music more as something to keep me occupied.”

“How old were you?” asks Chuuya. He can’t even remember how old he was when his mom had started him on the piano. It seems like it’d always been a part of his life.

“Ten,” says Dazai. He doesn’t look happy but he keeps going. “I don’t think they were expecting me to take to it so strongly. Neither of them had any real interest in it.”

“Then you turn out to be a child prodigy,” says Chuuya, seeing where this is going. “Which reaches Mori somehow.”

Dazai stabs his next piece of waffle probably harder than he needs to. “Yup. I’m still not sure how he manages to track his acts down. I have no idea how he picked up on you hidden in The Sheep.”

“He knew who I was,” says Chuuya, fighting down his own discomfort. “Who I really was, I mean. He knew who my mom was. He told me the first time I met him.”

“That doesn’t surprise me,” says Dazai darkly. Then he looks up, a confused expression on his face. “Wait, what do you mean who you really were?”

“He knew my old last name, Kashimura,” says Chuuya slowly and slightly awkwardly. He had been sure Dazai knew that.

Dazai opens and closes his mouth, having very clearly not known that. “You have a fake last name,” he says blankly.

“It’s not *fake*,” says Chuuya, slightly annoyed. “It’s real, it’s the name on all my documents now. I didn’t want to be connected to the other name after everything.”

Dazai’s face lights up in understanding. He snorts then. “Do you know how many hours I could have saved if I had known that?”

Chuuya laughs too. “Maybe that’ll teach you to not be such a nosy bastard.”

Chuuya’s phone buzzes, but it’s just Tachihara sending him a song he’d mentioned last night. Chuuya puts it down to listen to later. “Is anyone going to be wondering where we are?”

“They have no reason to believe we’re not still at the hotel,” says Dazai. He’s mostly done with his food and is now arranging what’s left on his plate into a waffle and whipped cream pyramid.

“Won’t our phones show that we’re not?” asks Chuuya. He’s starting to get full himself. He always hates wasting so much food though, an old habit from when he was living on the generosity of others after he’d ditched his last foster family.

Dazai scoffs. “I turned off the GPS on our phones weeks ago.” He finishes his coffee and leans back into his seat.

Chuuya sighs and lays down his fork. “Don’t touch my stuff, mackerel.”

“Don’t have such obvious passwords, slug,” says Dazai. He signals to their waitress for the bill, which he pays in cash. Chuuya raises his eyebrows.

“If you’re going incognito, don’t leave a paper trail,” says Dazai simply. Chuuya shakes his head, but follows him out of the diner and back towards the hotel.

The city is more awake than when they’d gotten there, so they keep their heads down as they walk, not talking much. They get back to the hotel without any hiccups, sliding past the people in the lobby. Chuuya pulls Dazai to the stairs rather than the elevator, even though he pouts (lazy asshole).

They quickly change in their hotel room into their usual attire. Chuuya exchanges the purple hat for his usual one, wondering what Arthur is up to. Chuuya has been meaning to reach out to him, but hasn’t found the time or the words yet. He’d kind of blown up at him when they’d met. He doesn’t feel like apologizing though, he’s not sorry. So he keeps putting it off.

They head downstairs to meet the rest of the tour crew at the fancy hotel breakfast. Chuuya loses Dazai in the crowd, but grabs some fruit and goes to sit next to Hirotsu (yes, he’d just been full, but it looks good).



The older man greets him with a tired smile. “Is that all you’re eating?”

“I’m fine,” says Chuuya, popping a grape into his mouth.

Dazai shows up, carrying a cup that he places in front of Chuuya. It’s the tea he’d promised.

Chuuya raises the cup towards him in thanks, taking a sip. It’s still pretty hot, but not boiling like Kouyou would have it.

Dazai shoves Chuuya in further to sit next to him. He eyes Chuuya’s plate. “How are you still hungry? Your body is so tiny. Where do you store all the food?”

Chuuya throws a few grapes at his face. Hirotsu sighs loudly. It’s the start of another day on tour.

It becomes another one of their rituals though. Dazai will drag him to weird, off the beat and path places when they have a lull period. Sometimes it’s the early morning, sometimes it’s the middle of the night or the early afternoon. They don’t always pull off not getting recognized, but for the most part they’re left alone. They go to cafes, a laser tag place where they’re the only players, and even a museum once (where they’d played a game that consisted of who could pull off the biggest stunt before they got kicked out).

While they’re now even busier than they used to be (especially when they have to sprint to be on time for an event because they’d dicked around for too long), Chuuya is much happier. It makes him feel more himself to get a chance to just hang out. Dazai doesn’t make it easy to tell his mood, but Chuuya can tell he appreciates it too. At the very least he hopes Dazai finds it a little less boring.

His favorite time with Dazai is still on stage, but these times aren’t a bad second.

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### **April 29, Three Months Since the Release of Corruption**

Chuuya wakes up on his seventeenth birthday feeling more well rested than usual. It takes him a moment to recognize what the weight is slumped against him. Dazai is still in bed too, which is rare. His face is smushed into the pillow almost completely. His left arm is resting across Chuuya’s stomach, his hand curled against his right hip. It’s warm, and Chuuya wants to linger in it.

But then the brightness of the room registers. Chuuya pulls away, to which Dazai makes a soft whining sound. Chuuya grabs his phone, seeing that it’s already 10AM. He quickly dismisses all the missed calls and texts.

“You fucker,” says Chuuya, scrambling to get out of bed. “Did you turn off my alarm?”

Dazai opens his eyes and sighs. He clearly hadn’t been really asleep. “I thought chibi could use his beauty rest.”

“We were supposed to get up two hours ago,” says Chuuya, trying not to get angry. He can see how Dazai thought it was a nice gesture, and Chuuya knows this is Dazai’s usual way of

doing things for him. But fuck, he really doesn't want to spend his birthday getting another lecture from Hirotsu. He's already annoyed they have to spend it working. They're in Kansas City, Missouri and are staying here until after the concert tomorrow. "We're going to be late. We have those stupid interviews and that fucking talk show appearance."

Dazai doesn't make any move to get out of bed. "Do we?"

Chuuya pauses from starting to lift off his shirt at the tone of his voice. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"I made them up," says Dazai simply, stretching his arms out.

"You-you *what*?" asks Chuuya.

"I made them up," repeats Dazai cheerfully. "The interviews and appearance we were supposed to do today don't exist. I put them on the schedule so everyone would think the day was filled until it was too late." Dazai smirks a bit. "I emailed everyone last night to inform them of the 'mix up.' Didn't you think it was odd no one had come to get us despite us being so late?"

Chuuya stands there, trying to take that all in. Everything today had been scheduled months ago, which means Dazai has been planning this for *months*. He's been planning for it way before Chuuya had ever mentioned how much he needed breaks from the monotony of tour.

"We have the day off," says Chuuya in wonder, still hardly believing it.

"We have the day off," echos Dazai, grinning widely. "Well, except there's your birthday dinner with the tour crew tonight. We have to be back in time for that."

Chuuya stares at Dazai blankly, not able to form any words.

"So, what do you want to do?" asks Dazai, smirking at his shock.

Chuuya recovers, trying to hide his enormous smile. "Get dressed, we're getting the fuck out of the city."

Dazai follows his orders for once. They dress casually for the day, though Chuuya keeps the hat and choker. Dazai rolls his eyes but doesn't comment on it. He doesn't complain at all as Chuuya leads the way, easily swiping the keys to one of the PMR vans.

They find the van after walking up and down the lanes of the parking lot and unlocking and locking the doors. Chuuya hops in the driver's seat, practically buzzing from the thrill of a full day ahead of them.

"So where are we going?" asks Dazai as Chuuya adjusts the seat.

"Don't pretend like you don't already have it planned out," says Chuuya, turning to give Dazai an unimpressed look.

“It’s chibi’s birthday,” says Dazai, throwing his legs up on the dashboard. “He should get to pick.”

“Just shut up and tell me where we’re going,” says Chuuya, putting the car in gear and pulling out of the hotel parking lot.

“Well, there is this lake about half an hour north of here,” says Dazai. “It’s not super warm in April, but it’s certainly “the fuck out of the city.””

Chuuya snorts. It sounds absolutely perfect. “It’ll do.”

Chuuya turns up the radio as they drive out of town. Dazai doesn’t even wail about the music much. He even sings along with Chuuya to a couple of the songs. They stop at a department store on the way to grab supplies, mainly throwing a bunch of snacks in the cart as fast as possible to get out of there quickly. Someone asks them if they’re Double Black near the check out line and Dazai says no so convincingly Chuuya almost ruins it by laughing.

They end up sitting in shitty lawn chairs they bought at the store at the edge of the lake, eating cheap junk food and listening to music on Chuuya’s phone (which Chuuya has turned on Do Not Disturb to silence all the incoming calls and texts). It’s the most relaxed Chuuya has felt in...probably since last June to be honest.

Chuuya takes another drink of the bottled peach tea Dazai had picked out, even though its sugary nonsense and should barely get to be called tea. “How long have you been plotting this?” Chuuya asks, smiling over at Dazai.

“Plotting?” repeats Dazai, rolling his eyes. “This is how you thank someone for such a wonderful gift?” Chuuya leans forward so he can kick his chair, and Dazai smiles back.

“My initial plan was to go to a bar again,” says Dazai. “Just for the tradition. I was going to make Tachihara come too.”

Chuuya laughs. “I don’t even think he’s really forgiven you for last time.”

“Holding grudges places unnecessary stress on the body,” says Dazai obnoxiously. “He should learn to let go of his anger.”

Chuuya shakes his head. “You’re such an asshole.” It comes out extremely fond.

While Chuuya has somewhat gotten used to being famous (or as used to it as you could get), he hadn’t been looking forward to all the fuss that would be his birthday. Last year had been hard enough to get through. He’d never anticipated getting to have this.

They sit in silence for a couple minutes, just soaking in the sun. It’s not the best weather to hang out at the lake, but Chuuya doesn’t have any complaints.

“Seventeen,” says Dazai, ruining the moment, “What is that in dog years?”

“I fucking hate you,” says Chuuya, because he’s not allowed to say the opposite (despite how much he feels it in this moment). He settles for chucking a cheese puff at him. Dazai catches

it and pops it in his mouth.

“I wonder where we’ll be this time next year,” says Dazai, stretching out so he’s practically laying in his chair. The implication that they’ll obviously be together causes a pang in Chuuya’s chest.

“Next year,” declares Chuuya, “We will be in L.A. I don’t care who I have to threaten to make it happen.”

“I forget that chibi gets homesick,” says Dazai, smirking at him.

“I’m not homesick yet,” says Chuuya, rolling his eyes. “I may not be a fan of all the extra bullshit that comes along with it, but getting to play for all our fans is amazing. I don’t think I could ever be sick of it.”

“Chuuya, save all that sappy crap for the interviews,” says Dazai.

Chuuya doesn’t react to the taunt, too content to be bothered. The day passes by too quickly. They don’t even really do anything. They eat, they listen to music, they play a couple rounds of video games with the console Dazai brought with them. They dip their toes in the water before deciding it’s way too cold to get in. But if someone had asked Chuuya what his ideal birthday would be like, this would have been his answer.

It’s much too soon when they have to pack up to go back to the city. Chuuya has to convince Dazai not to leave the lawn chairs. Dazai argues back that they’re never going to use them again, and it was better to ditch the evidence they’d stolen the van. Chuuya ignores him and shoves them in the back of the van.

The drive back is quieter. Chuuya takes the time to return all the phone calls he’d ignored, apologizing and making excuses for not answering while accepting birthday wishes. Dazai is on his own phone, reading emails and playing a game. He only reacts when Chuuya calls Mori and that’s to give him a disgusted look.

They arrive back to the hotel around dusk. Chuuya grabs the lawn chairs out of the van, carrying them up to the front desk.

“Hey, can you have these shipped to L.A?” he asks the front desk worker.

“Um, yes,” says the woman, obviously recognizing him and looking between him and the chairs in bewilderment. “Uh, do you have an address?”

“Port Mafia Records, for Osamu Dazai,” says Chuuya brightly. “You can put it on the PMR tab.”

He walks away before the woman responds. Dazai is waiting for him, shaking his head at Chuuya. He leads the way to the elevator. They stop at their room and Chuuya takes a quick shower and changes, trying to prepare himself for the birthday dinner waiting for him. The food should be good at least. He kind of has a stomachache from eating junk all day.

Once they're both ready they go to the lobby, waiting for the car to take them to the restaurant PMR has rented out for the night. Chuuya almost sighs when his phone rings, preparing himself for another polite conversation before he notices the name on the screen.

He answers as quickly as possible. "Hey," he says, excitement clear in his voice.

"Hello," says Kouyou, sounding pleased as well. "Happy birthday, Chuuya."

"Thank you," says Chuuya, actually meaning it for once. "It's great to hear from you."

"Like I'd miss your birthday," Kouyou scoffs. "I trust you had a nice day? Hirotsu called in about the *mix up* with the scheduling." It's clear Kouyou knows exactly what happened.

"Yeah, what a strange coincidence," says Chuuya, laughing a little.

"You should go outside," says Kouyou, a hint of mischief in her voice.

"Kouyou, I said you didn't have to get me anything," says Chuuya, though he's not surprised. One did not easily tell Kouyou Ozaki what to do. He walks outside, and he sees Dazai follow behind him.

Chuuya sees it the second he gets outside the doors. "No way. No fucking way."

"Is that a pink motorcycle?" asks Dazai. He sounds deeply unimpressed.

"It is not pink, it is obviously red, you blind moron," snaps Chuuya, pulling the phone away from his mouth before putting it back. "Oh my god, Kouyou, I *love* it. You shouldn't have. Thank you."

"I figured I owed it to you after not getting you a car after you got your license," says Kouyou happily. "But if you ever injure yourself on it, I will kill you."

"Of course," says Chuuya easily. He walks forward to run his hands down the seat, still in awe.

"I'm afraid I have to go," says Kouyou, sounding very sorry and a bit annoyed. "But once you get back we'll celebrate properly."

"Sounds good," says Chuuya, not bothering to tell her it's not necessary, she wouldn't listen anyway. "Thanks, Kouyou."

"Bye, Chuuya. Have a good night," says Kouyou before hanging up.

Chuuya puts his phone in his pocket and throws his leg over the side of the bike so he can sit down, get the feel of it. He puts his hands over the handlebars. It's amazing, and he hasn't even turned the ignition yet.

"A tacky motorcycle to go with your tacky hat," says Dazai, observing him.

“Watch the comments or I’ll never take you for a ride on it,” says Chuuya, too wrapped up in the motorcycle to really be affected by Dazai’s insults.

“Why would I ever want to ride on that?” asks Dazai, face horrified at the thought.

Chuuya laughs, already thinking of how to trick him into getting on it. It’s funny how much he had been almost dreading today when he’d gone to bed last night. This is the best birthday he’s ever had.

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### **Late May, Four Months Since the Release of Corruption**

Chuuya doesn’t know how long he’s been awake, staring at the ceiling. The room has gone from mostly dark to somewhat brighter, indicating it’s been a long time. Dazai is asleep next to him, curled into himself and hogging most of the blankets. He always did get cold at night. He’s not touching any part of Chuuya, it’s almost odd to not have the sensation of bandages against his skin.

Chuuya isn’t even trying to sleep anymore, his mind just wouldn’t shut the fuck up. It’s playing a series of moments and memories, all of them terrible. It’s like a nightmare except he’s wide awake. He’d had a feeling this was coming, but he’d naively thought he could shove it down as he usually did.

He gets out of bed as quietly as he can (Dazai gets so little sleep, Chuuya isn’t going to ruin that for him. Chuuya drags him down enough as it is anyway, *a god of calamity*). He can’t stand to be in this room anymore. It’s suffocating, this whole fucking tour is suffocating, this entire existence is suffocating.

Chuuya goes for the backpack he carries around instead of his public appearances wardrobe (And isn’t that telling that he still keeps a set of clothes for running away? What had really changed since he was thirteen?). He puts on a pair of jeans and a black t-shirt, throwing a grey hoodie on under his old green jacket. He leaves his hat and choker (too distinctive) even though it feels wrong, his neck and head the incorrect weight.

Chuuya takes his phone and sets it next to the items he leaves behind. The time reads a little after five. He figures it’s enough of a signal to Dazai that he’s gone off on his own. But he doesn’t want anyone following him, not today.

He takes one last look at the other boy before he leaves the room. It makes his throat feel tight, and he swallows roughly as he turns to go, still being as silent as possible. He pulls the door behind him slowly so it only making a soft click as it shuts.

Chuuya doesn’t hesitate as he makes his way to the stairs, pulling his hood over his (unfortunately recognizable) red hair. People tend to look at you less when you look like you know where you’re going. He takes the stairs calmly, the only other people he crosses go about their own business, clearly just getting in or heading somewhere to be up this early.

He leaves the hotel out of a side entrance instead of the front door. He passes all of the tour vehicles as he walks, which makes him scowl a little.

It's probably selfish of him to take off like this. He doesn't want to disappoint anyone. But the thought of putting on his usual facade seems impossible right now. He's not like Dazai, he can't just fabricate an entire personality just because he needs to.

The fresh air makes it a little easier to breathe at least. Chuuya feels, well, not better as he gets further away, but a tiny bit lighter. He slips into the movement of the city around him. Chicago is distinctly different than L.A, but the familiar morning noises of the city settle something in him, the birds and the sounds of buses and traffic.

He doesn't have an exact route in mind, he just heads in the direction where he sees the lake. No one stops him as he walks, which is a miracle (although he probably looks like some street punk skulking around right now).

There aren't too many people near the beach as he gets closer. A sign tells him that it's closed, but he ignores that and walks onto the sand. He kicks off his shoes and carries them, the cool sand feeling cold against his bare feet.

Chuuya gets closer to the water so that it starts to drown out the other noise. He sits down in the sand, tossing his shoes next to him. He crosses his legs and leans his elbows against his knees, leaning his head against his hands.

*Do you want to know why you and I are so miserable?* his mom had asked him once, *Because you're stuck with me and I wanted to have a human child.*

Funny, now she'd been gone ten years and he was still miserable.

It's always strange to him how his anger about this is different than his anger about everything else. Usually when he was mad he lashed out, he wanted to hurt, to destroy. But when it came to this, that kind of reaction just felt hollow. He didn't have the energy to do any of that.

Ten years, she'd been gone *ten years*. He's seventeen, he has a family, he has an album that's been on the top of the charts for months. He'd done what Arthur had said, he'd made his own way in the world, he hadn't let what had happened to him hold him back.

So why did he still not feel fucking human? Why did he still hear her words echo in the back of his head? Why couldn't he just fucking get over it?

The emptiness feels insurmountable.

Lake Michigan isn't the worst substitute for the ocean. It has waves at least, even if it's missing the feeling of salt in the air that comes from the real ocean.

Chuuya's not sure where his attachment to the ocean began. It reminds him of music in a way, the crash of the waves on the shore. He's not sure how to put it into words why he finds it so calming. There's something about the vastness of it, that it remains constant no matter where in the world you go. Regardless of everything else, the tide always flows. The water has no preference for humans or nonhumans. It ignores the existence of all, just continuing to be.

He continues to sit there, watching the lake. He's not even sure if he really thinks as he does, more just letting his mind be blank, watching a wave crash on the shore, pull back in, and repeat. Time seems to flow strangely around him. The sky loses any trace of pink for a bright blue, and the sun is already high in the sky. He's not sure if it feels like seconds or days.

The sound of footsteps drawing near forces him back into the present somewhat. At first he thinks he has to be hallucinating, that the person he wants to see the most and the least can't be walking towards him. But a hallucination wouldn't look as pissed as Dazai does as he approaches him.

"God damn it, slug," says Dazai when he reaches him, sounding slightly out of breath. The anger in his voice is more apparent than he usually lets it be. "Do you have idea how long I've been looking for you? This beach is closed, and it doesn't allow dogs, especially ones without their collars."

"How the hell did you find me?" asks Chuuya, voice coming out thick after not speaking for...hours probably. He's almost certain he hadn't left any trace of where he was headed.

"You're extremely predictable," says Dazai, rolling his eyes. He gestures to the lake beside them irritably. "You get upset, look for the nearest body of water. Everyone from the tour thinks we're together and blowing off work."

"I didn't ask you to cover for me," says Chuuya. There is a hint of frustration trickling in, more vivid than usual after feeling so numb.

"I didn't do it for you, I did it so everyone wouldn't panic that you were missing," says Dazai, clearly more than a hint frustrated. He sits down in the sand next to Chuuya, facing him with a smile that couldn't be further from happy. "Now, care to share why you're playing hooky?"

"Not really," says Chuuya flatly, not turning away from looking at the lake.

"Not good enough," says Dazai sharply, even raising his voice a bit.

That shocks Chuuya into turning to look at him. Dazai is staring back, expression hard. He'd never fought him before on things he hadn't wanted to talk about.

"Today is...well, today's the day it happened," says Chuuya, voice still emotionless. "The thing with my mom. The day she died. Ten years ago."

"If you don't tell me things like this, how am I supposed to know?" asks Dazai, although there's been a shift in his body language. He's still clearly angry, but now there's more to it. "Do you really think I'd let them make you play *Corruption* today if I knew?"

"It's not about that," says Chuuya, shaking his head. "Although I couldn't ignore it as easily this year because of that. It's not even really about her. It's about...me, I guess. It's been ten years, but I still..." Chuuya pauses, unsure of his words. Chuuya has never had to say it out loud to another person before, he'd never felt like he could. But Dazai was here, and he'd



never flinched away from anything Chuuya had told him, never treated him any differently. “I still can’t stop believing I’m what she told me I am.”

Dazai still doesn’t flinch, but something flashes in his eyes. He’s quiet for a moment, and Chuuya tries hard to shove down the fear that he’s finally pushed him too far. Chuuya’s gaze flickers down and he notices Dazai’s fingers picking at the edge of his bandages. He looks back up at Dazai’s face, and it’s clear he saw him notice, but he doesn’t look bothered by it.

“I once read somewhere that music is the vernacular of the human soul,” says Dazai, voice barely carrying over the sound of the waves. He swallows, then continues on much louder. “I haven’t said this because I thought I had made my thoughts on the matter perfectly clear. But if you haven’t gotten it through your tiny skull, the music you write is the most achingly human thing I’ve ever heard. And if for some stupid reason you’re not human, then I’m not either. Whatever we are, we’re the same.”

“Dazai...,” is the only word Chuuya can form in response, voice trembling.

“What?” asks Dazai. It’s said with confidence, a declaration that he won’t allow Chuuya to disagree with what he’s just said. His dark eyes never leave Chuuya’s, more settling than a thousand oceans.

Chuuya has too much he wants to say, too much to thank him for. This was why Chuuya could never disturb the thing between them with his feelings, he couldn’t lose this. He would rather have Dazai by his side than risk anything. Partner is too weak a word to encapsulate all that he is to him, but he doesn’t have a better one.

*You make me want to believe that I’m human, admits Chuuya to himself. To be worthy of someone like you, I’d have to be human. And I want to be, so I can be that.*

Instead of saying that, he reaches forward awkwardly. His arms wrap around Dazai’s shoulders, and he pulls him in close, as if by doing it all at once he can cover his nerves. Chuuya buries his face in Dazai’s shoulder, squeezing him tightly.

Dazai sputters a bit, clearly caught off guard. For a long second Chuuya is worried he made a terrible mistake. But then Dazai’s arms come up, his right hand resting on his spine while his left arm covers his shoulders. His grip is just as rough, just as clumsy. It makes Chuuya smile, glad his face is hidden.

The only sounds he can hear are the waves of the lake crashing on the shore and their breathing. Their position is slightly uncomfortable but neither of them let go for a long while. Dazai’s hand moves hesitantly up and down his spine, unused to giving...affection? Comfort? Whatever it is, it grounds Chuuya. He couldn’t be feeling further away than how he’d felt in the hotel this morning.

Eventually he loosens his grip. Dazai immediately does the same. His face is hard to decipher as Chuuya pulls away, not because it’s an act, but because there are almost too many emotions to sort through. Chuuya has no idea what his face looks like, but it’s probably something similar.

They just look at each other for a moment in silence. Chuuya isn't sure what to say after that.

"We should go swimming," declares Dazai suddenly, shifting the mood entirely.

"Dazai. It is *May*. In *Illinois*," says Chuuya, rolling his eyes. The relief he feels at being able to shift back to normal (well, their version of normal) is overwhelming. "The water is freezing fucking cold."

"Funny, I thought slugs were cold-blooded," says Dazai, flashing Chuuya a huge smile. He stands up and starts stripping down to his underwear and bandages, walking towards the water without any hesitation.

"You are literally going to get hypothermia," warns Chuuya, watching him half with dread and the other half amusement. "Oh my god, stop. Wait. You're going to soak your bandages- oh, fuck it." Chuuya pulls off his own clothes and tosses them into the sand. He charges into the water too, gasping out loud at how cold it is.

Chuuya reaches where Dazai had gone under and has now resurfaced, hair wet and hanging in his face. He's clearly shivering, but he's still smiling at Chuuya.

"If you're there, I can play *Corruption* tonight," says Chuuya.

The smile drops from Dazai's face. "Chibi, you don't have to push yourself to-," Dazai starts to say before Chuuya cuts him off.

"Doesn't matter," says Chuuya, completely assured despite his teeth chattering a little. "That's what being Soukoku means, right? As long as you're there, I can get through whatever."

Dazai meets his eyes and then nods once, steadily. Then he winds up and splashes Chuuya in the face with icy water.

Chuuya splashes him back. Then he goes back into shore, already dreading getting his clothes wet. He tries to ring out his hair a little. Dazai follows behind him, also looking cold and unhappy. Chuuya wonders if it's worse for him with the damp bandages.

"I grabbed your phone," says Dazai once they're fully dressed and about to leave, tossing it to him. "Don't leave it behind again."

Chuuya barely catches it. "Thanks," he says sarcastically, though he means it a bit.

He sees a bunch of texts asking about where he is, and one from Dazai that is basically a threat that he was going to regret this stunt, but a couple messages stands out in particular.

**[10:03 am Arthur Rimbaud]: I'm thinking about you today. In the year since we've met, you've managed to impress me even more. Double Black is one of the best albums I've heard in years. You have much to be proud of. I'm sorry all the success overlaps with such a dark time.**

**[10:06 am Arthur Rimbaud]: Apologies if this text offends you. I know I'm still under orders to fuck off.**

Chuuya laughs, hard. He hadn't spoken to Arthur long enough to learn much about him, but he feels warm at his words despite how cold his body is.

**[11:22 am Chuuya]: I may be open to lifting those orders**

**[11:22 am Chuuya]: Thank you Arthur**

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## **June 19, Nearly Five Months Since the Release of Corruption**

Chuuya is standing just offstage while Dazai talks to the crowd. He has no idea what he's saying though, he's too busy fighting off his jitteriness to listen.

The only song left on their setlist is *Corruption*. Chuuya had been surprised that they were going to do a show on Dazai's birthday, but Dazai hadn't seemed to mind.

He's gone back and forth whether this is a great idea or going to completely backfire a thousand times. He'd already taken Dazai to get frozen yogurt at seven this morning and given him the new games he'd thought he'd like. Dazai had seemed grateful and didn't seem to expect anything else.

But it doesn't feel like even close to enough. Dazai's birthday gift had been perfect, and he'd pulled it off masterfully. Chuuya had to do his best to match it.

The things that made Dazai happy weren't as obvious though. Chuuya had wracked his brain for weeks before coming up with this.

It's a risk, that's for sure. Chuuya takes another deep breath, pumping himself up. Then he strides out onto the stage, smile plastered on his face. The audience yells as he comes into view, cutting Dazai off in the middle of his sentence.

Dazai looks up to watch him walk towards him on stage. Dazai is leaning up against the piano, and his expression turns to a confused one as he takes in Chuuya's outfit.

Chuuya had done a quick change into the clothes he'd stashed backstage. Instead of a suit or the carefully selected clothes from the wardrobe department, he wears a pair of jeans with a slight tear in the knee and a plain red t-shirt, a cheap leather jacket completing the look. He'd even left off his chocker and his hat. He's never played a show without them this tour.

Basically, he's dressed like a teenage brat, the exact opposite of the look that had been drilled into them over and over again. They were supposed to lean out of their age, not into it.

"*Oh grantors of dark disgrace,*" sings Chuuya flippantly, not putting any of the usual emotion he would into the words. He waves a hand along to the lyrics dismissively. "Do not wake me, blah blah blah."

Dazai's expression shifts from confused to slightly bewildered. He stays in place as Chuuya approaches, clearly not sure where Chuuya is going with this.

"Actually I don't feel like singing *Corruption*," says Chuuya, wrinkling his nose, now standing in front of Dazai. He taps his chin as if in thought. "I don't really feel like singing with you either."

He reaches forward and rips the microphone out of Dazai's ear and tosses it on the ground, crushing it with his foot. Dazai is too shocked to stop him, mouth hanging slightly open.

"What are you doing?" asks Dazai. Chuuya is the only one who can hear him without his mic.

"Sorry, can't hear you," says Chuuya, shrugging casually. He walks towards the center of the stage. "Let's try this!"

"*When I was six, I saw my first picture below the hips*," sings Chuuya enthusiastically. He dances along with the words, swaying his own hips suggestively. "*By the time I was ten, I still thought about down there now and again.*"

The audience doesn't seem to know what to think at first, but there's some whoops of approval.

"*As I got older, my thoughts grew bolder.*" Chuuya stalks around the front of the stage obnoxiously. "*Until my desires couldn't be denied.*"

In addition to the way they're supposed to dress, they're also not supposed to be overtly sexual. Kouyou often said, "Sex sells, but it's a cheap sale that doesn't last." They didn't have to be chaste or anything, but the way Chuuya is moving is definitely over the line.

Not to mention the song choice, *Vita Sexualis*. It would be a horrible choice from the lyrics alone. But the most damning thing about it is that it had been written by Ogai Mori, an old shame he'd buried with ruthless precision.

Chuuya goes all out on the chorus, singing and dancing as flirtatiously as he can.

*Vita sexualis, it's natural to explore*

*Vita sexualis, can't blame a guy for wanting more*

*I don't know why everyone acts like it's so complex*

*When it comes down to it, we're all thinking about sex*

"Hmm, not quite right," says Chuuya almost immediately after the chorus ends. The crowd is still screaming and laughing at his antics. "Let's try this."

*“It’s a Friday,”* sings Chuuya solemnly, over-singing the words as much as possible. *“And it’s been a hell of a week. Feels like I’ve been stuck in a losing streak.”*

They hadn’t gotten in too much trouble for inadvertently promoting The Sheep last time. Hirotsu hadn’t been exactly pleased, but he’d ultimately concluded the PR boost outweighed the awkward situation with Gelhert Sound Services. But they had been warned to never sing *Life’s Better With A Little Party In It* again.

People actually start to sing along with him, and Chuuya has to fight not to smile and ruin his dramatic rendition. *“But tonight is the night we turn it around. There’s not a thing that can keep me down.”*

“Nah, that’s not right either,” says Chuuya, huffing a sigh. He then turns to face Dazai, who’s still standing near the piano. He’s wearing a look of sheer bafflement that almost breaks Chuuya’s concentration with the need to snort. He locks eyes with Dazai as he starts his next song, no longer putting on a show.

*“Happy birthday to you,”* sings Chuuya earnestly, voice clear and full of emotion. He doesn’t hold anything back, trying to put how much he cares into the notes. For once, he ignores the fucking Count’s instructions and doesn’t look away from Dazai once as he walks forward. *“Happy birthday to you.”* Dazai doesn’t look away either, his face that slight show of vulnerable that he only shows when you truly catch him off guard.

*“Happy birthday, dear, dear, dear Dazai,”* sings Chuuya, reaching Dazai and slowly lifting his right fist to hit Dazai’s chest. Dazai’s hand comes up to catch his hand more seemingly on instinct than an active decision. *“Happy birthday to you.”*

Chuuya is vaguely aware that the crowd had joined in singing with him at some point, but he doesn’t pay them any attention, still focused completely on Dazai. Dazai is staring back, hand still loosely gripping Chuuya’s fist, fingers trembling just the slightest bit. The emotion in his eyes is overpowering, he’s wholly transfixed, invested in the music Chuuya had just sung in a way Chuuya hasn’t really seen before.

“I guess we can sing *Corruption* now,” says Chuuya, turning away and facing the crowd before he does something stupid. He keeps his tone light, but he has to force it. “We just need to get Dazai a new mic. The guy is so clumsy, seriously. Those things are expensive, he should be more careful.”

He’s barely aware of the laughter that follows as Dazai shifts his grip to his wrist and pulls him offstage. His hold is tight, almost painful. But instead of going to get a new microphone he drags Chuuya into the nearest storage closet and closes the door behind them.

“What was that?” asks Dazai. He releases him and leans against the closed door, arms crossed. His expression has slipped back into something less open, now more inquiring than anything.

“Your birthday present,” says Chuuya, fighting to sound nonchalant. He still feels a bit exposed for how much of himself he’d just put out there.

“People aren’t going to be very happy about your song choices,” says Dazai, frowning a little. He’s still watching Chuuya, searching for answers. “Or your wardrobe. Or anything you just did. I think you went far enough that you probably even earned a direct scolding from Mori. He’s going to be livid you sang *Vita Sexualis*, which I don’t even know how you know about.”

“Yeah, that’s kind of the fucking point,” says Chuuya, rolling his eyes to cover up his nerves.

Chuuya gets to see the exact moment it dawns on Dazai. There’s a light inside his eyes that sparks. Still, he asks for confirmation. “You pissed off Mori for me as a present?”

Chuuya shrugs as if it isn’t a big deal. “You’re not exactly easy to shop for.”

Dazai laughs then, sharp and breathless. Then he smiles at Chuuya, much smaller and less expressive than his usual grin. It’s genuine, the kind Chuuya rarely sees (the kind he would destroy things to see). Chuuya can’t fight his own answering smile.

“If you’re done, we still have a show to finish,” says Chuuya, shoving Dazai out of the way and exiting the closet. A stagehand is rushing down the hall and stops flat when he notices him, quickly saying he’s found them into his headset. They rush Chuuya back on stage while Dazai goes to get mic’ed.

Chuuya ignores all the alarmed and uneasy looks he gets. He doesn’t care about the repercussions. Whatever they are, it had been totally worth it.

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### **August, Six and a Half Months Since the Release of Corruption**

It’s not uncommon for everyone on the tour crew to be freaking out, but it is uncommon for Chuuya to not know why they’re freaking out (or to not be the cause of it, or for *Dazai* to not be the cause of it). But there’s a frantic energy in the air when he walks into the stadium this afternoon. It’s still many hours before the show, and he can’t figure out why people are scrambling so much. Chuuya had just come from lunch at a place that served inside out sandwiches, and Dazai had stopped at the hotel to grab something.

He catches Tachihara as he’s walking by. He’s calmer than most of the other people, but he had a tension to his posture as well.

“What the hell is going on?” asks Chuuya.

“Mori just emailed an hour ago,” says Tachihara, smiling with way too many teeth to be happy. “Elise is coming to see the show tonight.”

“Oh,” says Chuuya. “Fuck.”

“Yeah,” agrees Tachihara. “So it’s an all hands on deck situation.”

Chuuya lets Tachihara go, starting to feel a bit on edge himself. After his rendition of *Vita Sexualis* in June he’d had a one on one video conference with Mori that still kind of haunted him to this day. Mori had ended the call with, “Chuuya, despite all the reasons you’ve given

me not to, I like you. Don't ruin that." Chuuya has made sure not to do anything since then to get on the boss's radar.

The thing is, Chuuya actually really likes Elise. She's a sweet girl, if a little spoiled. He thinks more than anything else she just wants other kids her age to spend time with. But Mori keeps her under a pretty tight leash. He gets Mori's reasoning for that though, there were a lot of people out there who would use Elise to get to Mori if given the opportunity.

But because of Mori's overprotectiveness everyone at PMR had to bend over backwards to make sure she was taken care of and happy. It would not do well to disappoint her.

Chuuya jumps into preparing for the show with everyone, helping where he can. Dazai shows up eventually, surveying the madness around him, unfazed as usual.

"Something I should know?" Dazai asks him while Chuuya tries to make the observation room more suitable for an eleven year old girl. He's mostly spraying the shit out of everything with Febreze and hoping for the best.

"Elise is on her way here," says Chuuya, turning to shrug at him.

"Port Mafia Record's princess herself," says Dazai sarcastically. He flops onto the couch, clearly not interested in helping.

"Don't be a dick to her, Dazai," warns Chuuya. He points the Febreze at him threateningly.

"I am always perfectly nice to Elise," protests Dazai, raising a hand to his chest innocently. "You're the one she's obsessed with."

"She's not obsessed with me," says Chuuya, rolling his eyes. "She likes me because I treat her like an actual person instead of Mori's spawn."

Dazai is spared from replying when a familiar voice calls out, "Chuuya!"

Chuuya is hit with the weight of a person barreling into him. He barely stops them from falling over. He laughs and hugs Elise back, ruffling her hair a bit as he lets go. She's dressed in a light pink dress with a matching bow holding up some of her hair in a half-ponytail.

"Hey there, kiddo," says Chuuya, smiling as she tries to fix her hair with a pout. "Long time no see."

"I've been begging Mori to come let me see a show for ages and ages," says Elise, practically bouncing in excitement. "I finally convinced him to let me go to this one after threatening to not speak to him for three months if he didn't."

Chuuya laughs, shaking his head. She's a little girl, but she has the CEO of Port Mafia Records wrapped around her little finger. "Nice one."

"We're thrilled to have you," says Dazai from his spot on the couch. He smiles at Elise too, though it's more of a smirk.

“Oh, hi Dazai,” says Elise, just noticing him for the first time. She doesn’t move to hug him, settling for a wave, which Dazai returns flippantly.

“Are you growing out your hair?” Elise asks Chuuya, turning back towards Chuuya and looking up at him.

Chuuya touches his bangs where they’re getting pretty long. “Maybe. I hadn’t really thought about it.”

“It’d look cool,” says Elise confidently. Chuuya wonders how often anyone contradicts her. “When do you guys go on?”

“Soon,” says Dazai, moving forward to grab Chuuya’s wrist and drag him away. “We have to go get ready now. But we’ll see you after.”

“Okay,” calls out Elise to them as they go. “Good luck!”

They meet a panicked looking Hirotsu on their way. Dazai points behind them. “She’s in there.” The older man nods gratefully and fast walks towards the observation room.

Chuuya doesn’t get a chance to scold Dazai for being an ass, they’re too busy prepping for the show. It goes off without a hitch for the most part, regardless of all the stress and commotion. Chuuya even forgets that she’s there, losing himself in the music and the crowd.

It’s only when it’s all over that he remembers, coming out of his dressing room to see her talking to Hirotsu. She’s still brimming with energy despite the late hour. Chuuya walks up to them, trying to fight off his own exhaustion.

“So what’d you think?” asks Chuuya when he reaches them.

“You were amazing!” gushes Elise immediately. “I was just telling Ryuuro how much fun I had. I wish I could stay for another concert, but Mori’s making me fly back in the morning.”

Chuuya has never heard a single person called Hirotsu Ryuurou before. He covers a snort. “Well, I’m glad you liked it. We can play for you again when we get back to L.A. in September.”

“My favorite song was *Corruption*,” says Elise, leaning forward like it’s a secret. Chuuya feels an odd mix of pride and discomfort, even though hoards of people have been saying that to him for almost seven months now. “I wish I could play the piano like that.”

“Should we get going to the hotel, Elise?” asks Hirotsu, kindly but commanding.

Elise’s face falls completely. “Oh, okay,” she says, voice losing all the excitement it just had.

The sight of it makes something in Chuuya’s heart pang. He abandons his plans of going back to the hotel to sleep. “I can take her back to the hotel, Hirotsu.”

“Really?” asks Hirotsu, looking slightly grateful at the offer



“Really?” asks Elise, looking ten times as grateful.

“You said you wanted to be able to play *Corruption*,” says Chuuya, leading her back to the stage, nodding to Hirotsu as they go. “We’ve got a piano right here.”

“I’ll be able to play the piano solo?” asks Elise, doubt clear in her voice.

“Let’s start with the first verse,” says Chuuya, laughing a bit.

He spends a good couple hours watching Elise plunk her way through the same chords over and over again, albeit very enthusiastically. He doesn’t feel too bad about it though when he finally gets back to the hotel and she thanks him, squeezing him in a tight hug again.

“Thanks so much, Chuuya,” says Elise when she finally lets him go. “I’ll practice more when I get home.”

“Don’t get in too much trouble,” says Chuuya as a goodbye, ruffling her hair again.

Elise doesn’t even seem to mind this time. “No promises,” she declares brightly, going to meet the assistant who’s staying in the room with her.

“How heartwarming,” says Dazai sarcastically, appearing behind him. Chuuya hasn’t seen him since after the show, he’s surprised he’s here in the lobby instead of in their room. He usually isn’t one to pick a crowded space over seclusion, especially after a show.

“What’s with you?” asks Chuuya, noting how agitated he seems.

“Nothing,” drawls Dazai, walking towards the elevator without waiting for Chuuya to follow him. Chuuya rushes to catch up with him. Dazai doesn’t speak as they ride up to their floor, but he’s clearly pissed about something.

Chuuya waits until they’re in their room to ask. “What’s wrong?” Chuuya slumps on the bed, realizing sleep probably isn’t coming soon from the pinched look on Dazai’s face.

“I already said it was nothing,” says Dazai, not even bothering to lie convincingly. He leans against the TV stand, pulling out his phone and starting to type on it.

“Look, I’m fucking exhausted,” says Chuuya, trying not to get annoyed. “Can you just tell me why you’re pissed so we can deal with it?”

“How many times do you need me to say it’s nothing?” asks Dazai, voice sharper this time. He puts down the phone, setting in on the TV stand roughly.

“Enough times so you stop fucking lying,” says Chuuya, losing the battle against annoyance completely. “Did something happen after the show?”

“Nothing happened after the show,” says Dazai, tone mocking. “Except your little piano session with Elise. You could have let me know you weren’t going back to the hotel right away.”

“I didn’t ask you to wait for me,” says Chuuya, but Dazai wouldn’t be this angry about Chuuya making him wait. He hasn’t seen him this genuinely furious in months. “I’ll keep asking until you answer. What is wrong?” He stresses each word.

“I just think it’s funny how you trip all over yourself to make Mori happy like a well-trained dog,” says Dazai, smirking at him darkly.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” asks Chuuya, now getting pissed himself. “Did you want me to be rude to the fucking *child* in some twisted show of support in your vendetta against our boss?”

“You didn’t have to be rude,” says Dazai shortly. “But you certainly didn’t have to spend hours playing the song you claim to despise with her.”

“I have *never* said I despised *Corruption*,” says Chuuya, standing up from the bed and raising his voice slightly. “And I didn’t do that *for* Mori, I did it for Elise. I remember what it’s like to be a kid who doesn’t have a lot of friends. And even if I *had* done it for Mori, it would have been my choice. I’m not going to pretend to hate Mori *for* you.” Chuuya is definitely shouting by the end.

“Can’t you see he’s manipulating you every single time he talks to you?” asks Dazai, not raising his voice at all, laughing bitterly.

“I’m not stupid,” snaps Chuuya. “And I’m not going to apologize for getting along with our boss. Most people would consider that a good thing. Just because you have your pointless fucking feud or whatever doesn’t mean I have to have any part of it.”

“Pointless?” Dazai repeats, now yelling too. “He’s the reason why-,” starts Dazai harshly before cutting himself off abruptly.

“The reason why what?” demands Chuuya, not in the mood for Dazai’s evasive bullshit right now.

“Nothing.” Dazai goes back to a normal voice level, tone infuriatingly dismissive, looking away and crossing his arms. “Forget it.”

“Fuck off,” says Chuuya, absolutely outraged. He storms into the bathroom, slamming the door behind him.

He takes a shower, still thrumming with anger the entire time. When he enters the bedroom again Dazai isn’t there anymore. It does nothing to calm him down. He gets ready for bed and lays down in the dark, but he’s wide awake.

He’s not sure how long he lies there before he hears the sound to the adjoining room open and shut. There’s movement on the other side of the bed, but Chuuya doesn’t move or speak to acknowledge it.

“I don’t really want to be here right now,” says Dazai, voice tight.

“I don’t really want you to be here right now,” replies Chuuya, still not turning over to face him. Neither of them say anything else for a couple minutes.

“I don’t think you’re stupid,” says Dazai eventually.

Chuuya doesn’t answer, just continues to lay there in silence.

“Are you really going to make me say it?” asks Dazai after it’s clear Chuuya isn’t going to say anything. His voice is much quieter now.

“Say what?” asks Chuuya into his pillow.

“That I’m worried about you,” says Dazai, barely audible.

Chuuya turns over to face him, struck by the distress in his expression. But still. “I can take care of myself. You’re supposed to trust me.”

“I do,” says Dazai, looking him right in the eye. “It’s him I don’t trust. He breaks people, Chuuya. It’s what he does.”

“I’ve had a lot of experience knowing how to tell when someone is a threat to me or not,” says Chuuya, because he trusts Dazai too but he’d meant what he said. He’s not going to pretend to feel animosity towards someone he doesn’t dislike just to make Dazai feel better.

“Okay,” says Dazai softly, even though it isn’t really. But Chuuya doesn’t resist when Dazai scoots over to wrap an arm around him, pulling himself closer. He ends up completely pressed up against Chuuya, head tucked into his neck.

It’s hard for Chuuya to stay mad at him like this, and he puts an arm around Dazai too, resting his hand against the back of Dazai’s neck. But the uneasiness in his stomach never fades completely, even though he’s able to fall asleep.

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## **MidSeptember, Seven and a Half Months Since the Release of Corruption**

Chuuya hadn’t exactly been ready for the tour to be over, but he can’t deny how amazing it feels to be back in L.A. The ocean air hits him like the sweetest welcome home. He half wants to go straight to the beach right from the plane. But Mori had set up some sort of debrief meeting with them for right when they got back a couple weeks ago. Chuuya had thought it would have been nice to have been given time to at least stop at his dorm first but doesn’t complain. You didn’t meet with the boss of your schedule, you met with him on his.

Walking into the PMR building is kind of surreal. Practically everyone they pass stops to congratulate them on the success of the album and the tour, still selling massively many months later. *Corruption* gets as much air play now as it did back in February. There’s been a couple whispers of Grammy nominations circulating.

Chuuya would probably chat with people a lot longer if Dazai wasn’t with him and hurrying him along. He doesn’t say much more than a simple thanks if he says anything at all. He’s been in a strange mood all day, but Chuuya just put it down to all the mixed emotions of

being done with tour. Chuuya had felt strangely disappointed at the end of the last show, bummed that he wouldn't get to experience anything like it for a while.

They eventually get on the elevator and up to the top floor to go see Mori. Chuuya raps on the door when they reach it, and Mori calls for them to enter.

No matter how many times Chuuya walks into the office it never fails to impress him a bit. The view out the huge glass windows facing the ocean never gets old. Chuuya takes it in as they move forward to stand in front of Mori's desk.

Mori gestures for them to take a seat in the chairs in front of the desk. Chuuya thinks this is the first time he's gone to see him where he hadn't been working on anything else when he walked in. Maybe this is what it's like to really have the boss's attention on you.

"First of all," says Mori, ever present cheerful tone and smile present, "I wanted to congratulate both of you on the immense success of Double Black and the tour."

"Thanks, Boss," says Chuuya, smiling back.

"How kind of you," says Dazai, voice dripping in insincerity. Chuuya has to resist the urge to stomp on his foot. Couldn't they go a fucking minute before they started sniping at each other?

"Next I wanted to discuss future plans for the both of you," says Mori, dropping the cheerfulness for a more serious expression. "While the two of you have made a formidable pair, I think it's best to put some distance between you now, professionally."

"What?" asks Chuuya before he can stop himself. Because seriously, *what*? He turns to look at Dazai, but he's still looking at Mori. His expression is completely calm, only looking slightly annoyed if anything.

"It's a business move, Chuuya," says Mori, drawing his eyes back to him. He looks apologetic, but it doesn't feel sincere. "When artists have a debut album as big as you two have, the follow up almost never does as well."

"You said almost never," says Chuuya, latching onto the word like a lifeline. He wants to kick Dazai for not saying anything. Does he seriously not care? Is he seriously going to just let this happen? "We could be the exception."

"It's unlikely," says Dazai. The words hit Chuuya like a blow to the gut. He can't hide the betrayed look from his face. Dazai continues on without reacting, voice devastatingly neutral. "And when it has been done, there's usually a long break in between the first album and the second, to build the anticipation for the next one."

"Exactly, Dazai," says Mori. It figures the one time the two agree on something it's this. "I'm not saying we should hang up Double Black permanently. Of course not. But we need to give you both a bit of breathing room, to grow in your own rights. But when the time is right, we'll put you back together."

Chuuya catches on to what the meeting is really about then. He feels like a fool for not seeing it sooner. “What were your plans for us in the meantime?”

“For you, Chuuya, there’s a new band I think you’d be a perfect fit for as lead guitar,” says Mori, changing subjects seamlessly, as if it’s a simple matter open and shut. “More of a rock sound compared to what you’ve currently been doing. Motojiro Kajii is singing, and your friend Tachihara is going to be the drummer. I’m putting Hirotsu in charge of the project. We’re still looking for a bass player. The name of the group is The Black Lizards.”

It’s almost more than he can take in at once. He isn’t going to be singing anymore? Not that he minded being out of the spotlight, he’d been fine with it back with The Sheep. It’s more the shock (and that he’s going to be doing it all *without Dazai*). He doesn’t know what the fuck to say, but Mori doesn’t seem to expect a response.

“As for Dazai,” continues Mori, smiling a little too widely at Dazai, “You’ll be taking Takuboku Ishikawa’s recently open position as the newest executive of Port Mafia Records.”

Chuuya has to cover up the gasp that he almost lets out. He hadn’t heard anything about Ishikawa stepping down, not even from Kouyou. Part of him wants to protest that he’s only *seventeen*, but he remembers him promoting Kouyou at barely a couple years older. He remembers *I’ve always cared more about results than age*. It doesn’t make it any easier to swallow. Dazai is now technically *his superior*.

“What a thrill,” says Dazai, smirking a little, and Chuuya is horrified to see it’s not all fake. “I’m excited to see all the things my new position will hold.”

“Your new office has already been cleared out. You can move the stuff from your old one at your leisure,” says Mori, passing Dazai a keycard to the executive suite of the building that Chuuya has never been in.

Chuuya sits in his chair, almost numb to his surroundings, still trying to process everything that’s happened. He looks up when Mori says his name again.

“You can take a couple days to settle in before starting working with The Black Lizards,” says Mori, which normally Chuuya would appreciate as a uniquely kind offer from the man, but he doesn’t think he would settle into these new changes if he had months. “Elise is also ecstatic you’re back. She’s been going on and on about showing you how much better she’s gotten at the piano.”

“I’ll come see her soon,” promises Chuuya, standing up instead of waiting to be dismissed like he usually would. “I won’t take up anymore of your time then.”

“Welcome back, Chuuya,” says Mori, flashing another smile at him. Chuuya manages to give one back, before turning and walking out of the office in tightly controlled steps. He doesn’t look at Dazai at all as he goes.

He thinks he’s left him behind, but Dazai catches the elevator just as it’s about to close. He seems a bit out of breath, looking at Chuuya with his classic blank expression. Chuuya looks away to stare at the elevator instead, crossing his arms.

Dazai hits the button for the floor of his office (or old office, Chuuya corrects darkly), and seems surprised when Chuuya hits the button for the bottom floor. He doesn't say anything though. Chuuya thinks he's letting him leave but when Dazai gets off he grabs his wrist and drags him with him, ignoring his protests.

Chuuya pulls out of his grip but gives up and walks alongside Dazai toward's his office, feeling like a live wire, that a single touch or word will cause him to explode. Dazai enters the office and Chuuya follows, shutting the door with enough force that it slams.

Chuuya locks the door behind him, turning to face Dazai. He's sitting on the top of his desk, arms crossed and watching Chuuya, expectant. The familiar tapestry hanging behind him and the waiting package sitting on the desk fuel Chuuya's fury even more, like they're symbols of everything they'd just been stripped of.

Chuuya has been angry at him many times in the couple years he's known him, but he's never been this outraged. "What the fuck was that in there?" he demands, practically spitting the words.

"My promotion?" asks Dazai, his voice so unaffected Chuuya could smash something. "I didn't ask for it, chibi."

"I meant you not even saying a word about him splitting us up," says Chuuya angrily, stalking forward so he's standing in front of him, glaring at him.

"Mori had already made up his mind," says Dazai with a shrug. "It didn't make sense to argue."

"So you're seriously just fine with this?" asks Chuuya. He'd thought he was already as furious as he could get, but it's only getting worse with every calm and composed word out of Dazai's mouth.

"He said it was a break, not permanent," says Dazai, uncrossing his arms and leaning forward so he's eye to eye with Chuuya. "Don't be so dramatic."

"Can you just be fucking honest with me for once in our god damn lives?" shouts Chuuya, losing all attempts to keep his emotions under control. He laughs, bitterly and a little manically. "I'm an idiot. You obviously don't even give a shit. Kouyou was right." He thinks of how Dazai hadn't ever stopped working on other projects throughout the tour, his pleased expression when he'd been named an executive. He jabs a finger at Dazai in accusation. "You'll go off and record music with someone else, this was just a stepping stone for your career."

That seems to finally strip Dazai of his seeming indifference. He jumps off the desk, pushing Chuuya's hand away forcefully. He grips the collar of Chuuya's shirt, using it to pull him forward so that their faces are just inches apart. "I'm not going to record music with anyone else," says Dazai vehemently, voice more forceful and intense than Chuuya has ever heard it.

"Like you'll have a choice," says Chuuya, tone slightly broken. Dazai's outburst had broken through his anger, replacing it with a bitter and aching hollowness.

“Mori can’t make me do anything,” says Dazai earnestly. His dark eyes are filled with conviction, as if that will convince him. “I’m not going to record music without you. It’s not happening.”

Chuuya doesn’t respond, just shaking his head slightly. He looks down at the ground instead of at him.

“Nothing’s going to change,” whispers Dazai.

Chuuya doesn’t believe him. Everything is going to change. Dazai has become such an integral part of his life, and now he was being ripped away. It’ll be just like Kouyou last year, just like with The Sheep. Why can’t he hold onto the people he cares about the most (*nothing will escape you*, and it’s much louder than a whisper this time)?

There isn’t anything he can say, he just tries to make the most of this last moment together.

He can’t do this again, not with Dazai. He’d barely made it though the other times. But this time, things will be different. This time he won’t allow himself to be left behind.

## Chapter End Notes

If you finished this behemoth of a chapter, I truly commend you and thank you even if you didn’t enjoy it lol. Just reading it all is impressive. There’s just something about tour chapters that demand length (ignore the fact that there is 5k before they even leave for tour)

I actually really don't LIKE creating OCs (and there are so many in this chapter ugh- if i could have kept calling them the reporter over and over I WOULD HAVE) but this is bsd so i can at least make my OCs based on real life authors

- Isamu Yoshii: actually WAS a real life count and Japanese tanka poet, and published his works in the literary magazine owned by Mori Ogai, and was part of the magazine’s inner circle
- Nora Roberts: an American author of more than 225 romance novels (girl makes my measly fic look like a picture book), which is why i felt it fitting she asked questions about their love life
- Nicholas Sparks: an American romantic-drama novelist with many screen adaptations. i was going to not do him dirty like this but he literally came up when i googled dramatic authors and he popped right up. so he was tasked with the dramatic interview (not that i really care for his books much, the plots are all kind of recycled, but also using the name nicholas sparks made me realize how much of a fake name it sounds like haha)
- Takuboku Ishikawa is another Japanese poet who originally ran with Mori and co but then became a socialist and renounced naturalism

Other Real Life facts because you know how I do

- Rain Beyond the Window: “Another day of morning rain”—taken from real life Chuuya Nakahara’s poem Rain in June
- Real life Dazai enjoyed Natsume Soseki and Murasaki Shikibu
- Ta Prohm is beautiful and I don’t encourage you to climb on it. The temples actually do have monkeys that you’re not supposed to interact with because of the rabies risk.
- Kashimura was actually real life Chuuya’s last name when he was born before his father married into the Nakahara family and changed their last names
- The sunshine diner doesn’t exist, but the lake north of Kansas City does (not that I’ve been there)
- “Music is the vernacular of the human soul.” -George Latham (who i have no idea who that is, but quote really struck me)
- Vita Sexualis is of course influenced by the real book of the same name by Mori!

Fun fact, most tours are much longer than six months and when i found that out i almost had a mini breakdown because six months was what i had allotted for in my timeline and i was so disappointed the fic wouldn’t be accurate as if people are reading it for the musical accuracy??? but all the cities i mentioned are places artists visit on tours (i mentioned this fic is over-researched). i actually tried mapping out the entire route of the tour but in real life the path of a tour makes NO sense they backtrack all over the place. so i chalked it up to Mori could make it all work however it needed to and let go of my accuracy (though it did not go gently into that good night)

sometimes i fucking cackle at the slow burn of this fic, like they have literally known each other almost two years and we are like 50k+ into this and...THEY HUGGED

as much as this chapter is just so so long, it's really an ode to the height of the Double Black partnership. Things are never really the same after this...

LASTLY: So the lovely Imalwayshungry requested last chapter that I take some time to describe what the boys’ voices sound like in my head. I was hesitant to do this, because if you already have a vision, I don’t want to ruin that for you! So read at your own discretion!!

Chuuya: Chuuya is the more vocally impressive singer. He has a huge range. He’s one of those people who you hear and you’re like, damn they can *sing*. He sounds good singing just about anything, but he shines best in a power ballad where he can really show off his talent.

Dazai: Dazai has more of a pleasant, clear voice. He’s extremely good at pitch, tone, and vocal control. You listen to him and think, wow I don’t know if I’ve ever been more content listening to the human voice. Dazai can also sing anything, he’s a vocal chameleon of sorts. He can hear something once and sing it back perfectly.

Then together they’re kind of the classic talent vs. genius scenario.

(I could also try to find some real life examples if people want that? let me know)



I gave you over 26k words, perhaps you could spare a couple in a comment (is that too aggressive?? PLEASE TELL ME WHAT YOU THINK I LIVE FOR THE INTERACTION)

# If You Can't Live Without Me, Why Aren't You Dead Yet?

## Chapter Summary

what goes up, must come down (you cannot escape gravity)

## Chapter Notes

title (once again) taken from the Mayday Parade song of the same name (this fic is not only Mayday Parade promo i swear)

I AM ONCE AGAIN BACK AFTER OVER A MONTH. PRETEND TO BE SHOCKED

but for real guys, the support on the last chapter was just astronomical. my inbox was flooded with the most thoughtful comments, it made getting through THIS fucking chapter easier. we also passed 200 kudos!! i am just so grateful

(i had an existential crisis between wondering if i'm quarantine popular or perhaps an actually good writer)

i'm never going to talk about chapter length again. every time i do i manage to top myself. so i'm just going to shut up and throw this 43k at you. my beta hates me so much (i am my own beta and can confirm this statement)

we return to dual POV in this chapter, though it is more Dazai centric

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

## January 25th, Seven Years Since the Release of Corruption

@osamuuudazai 1s ago

**Happy #CorruptionDay everyone! I can't believe it's been seven years. I'm so grateful for all of the support everyone has given us.**

Dazai scowls as he posts the update to his social media pages, the stupid three sentences he'd agonized over for weeks.

Sometimes, he wishes he could back and tell his fifteen year old self to just sign Shirase instead. They would have cranked a couple albums out of him then dropped him, and Dazai would have never had to juggle all of these emotions.

Shouldn't there be some sort of expiration date on feelings like these? He'd gone four years without speaking to Chuuya, *four years*. Longer than they had ever worked together. He'd only been in the same room as Chuuya two days this year, and those interactions have managed to practically consume his entire life.

"There. I posted it," says Dazai, pouting from his spot on the ADA's couch in their break room.

"Let me refresh the feed," says Atsushi, sitting in one of the chairs across from him. He pulls out his phone and taps on the screen.

"What, don't you trust me, Atsushi?" asks Dazai, holding a hand up to his chest dramatically in offense.

"When it comes to this, not at all," replies Atsushi flatly. Dazai is somewhat touched that he knows him so well. Atsushi looks up once he sees the posts are there. "You were telling the truth."

"Why the long face?" asks Dazai, curious about his protégée's gloomy expression. Atsushi had a tendency to get kind of mopey from time to time, but he doesn't get why he'd be upset about this.

"Oh, it's nothing," says Atsushi, waving a hand dismissively.

"If you're going to lie, Atsushi," advises Dazai, "At least try to sound a little convincing."

"It's silly," protests Atsushi.

Dazai raises an eyebrow, conveying silently *when has that ever stopped anybody in this office from doing anything?*

Atsushi sighs, giving in. "When I was back at the orphanage," he says, looking out the window instead of at Dazai, "I used to love Double Black. I listened to *Corruption* all the time, it made me feel like I wasn't alone. You guys inspired me."

Dazai has heard that from many artists before, but it's never hit quite like it does this time. Atsushi's sincerity makes it ache a little rather than annoying him.

"I know this is L.A, and it's naive to think that people don't put on acts and pretend to like each other," continues Atsushi, meeting Dazai's eyes now. "But it still makes me a little sad that the duo I looked up to so much hate each other, and hate one of the songs that made me want to be a singer."

That makes Dazai feel more than a little guilty. He'd made the comment about *Corruption* meaning something to people primarily to mess with Chuuya, but that didn't mean it wasn't true. Dazai often forgets what the song is without all his own feelings attached to it, mostly

because he doesn't like to examine them too closely. Sometimes he also wishes he could go back and warn his sixteen year old self all the trouble that one song would cause in his life.

Dazai sighs. He supposes he owes Atsushi some honesty. This was being part of making music that could help people. Plus he can't stand it when the kid is down, it's like looking at a crying puppy.

"Chuuya is the most gifted singer I've ever met," says Dazai plainly, using his more serious tone that he usually has no need for at the ADA.

Atsushi blinks at him in shock. "But you always say that-," he starts to say before Dazai cuts him off.

"From the time I met him when I was fifteen, I've never heard a more impressive voice," says Dazai, the words coming easily despite how much Dazai usually avoids them.

"*Corruption* is him at his best. The song is objectively incredible. It's hauntingly beautiful. The first time he played it for me I was practically speechless."

"But subjectively," says Dazai, voice going cold now, "*Corruption* is the song that made the person I played music with feel inhuman and self-destructive, so I despise it."

Atsushi's face flickers through a bunch of different emotions, eventually settling on a combination of shock and sympathy. "Oh."

"But you shouldn't be sad," says Dazai, flipping back to his usual voice. "I'm glad *Corruption* was able to help you in a dark time in your life. One of the versatilities of music is how it affects all of us differently."

"That's a good point, Dazai," says Atsushi with a small smile, loyal as ever. The boy has an annoying habit of always trying to see the good in Dazai (Dazai likes it a lot more than he should.)

"Right," declares Dazai, standing up quickly and giving Atsushi a huge smile back. "Now let's stop dilly dallying and get back to the recording studio. Albums don't record themselves!"

Atsushi sighs a little under his breath, but resists the urge to point out the Dazai had been the to force them to take this break by dragging Atsushi here and whining about how much he didn't want to do the dumb posts.

Dazai turns his phone on silent so he doesn't have to see any notifications from said post. He's done his duty, and he's determined to make the rest of the day pass with as little to do with *Corruption* as possible.

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### **Mid-October, Eight and a Half Months Since the Release of Corruption**

"Merchandise numbers are up in the Northeast," says Ace, continuing his incredibly boring report on sales that has been going on for over ten minutes now. His voice always carries a

hint of smugness in it, as if he's personally responsible for the success, even though he has no musical talent whatsoever. "We're still a few weeks out from the holiday spike though."

Alan Bennett, or Ace as he obnoxiously goes by, had risen to his position as a Port Mafia Records executive through business connections alone. He had been in finance before Mori had brought him on shortly after he'd taken over as CEO. The Bennetts are extremely wealthy, and Ace had risen to the top of the finance sector through a series of backhanded exchanges of favors and debts that made even Mori look respectable in comparison. He'd earned himself the moniker The Jewel King, which he obviously loved and encouraged people to use.

Ace dresses possibly more lavishly than any other Port Mafia Records employee Dazai has ever seen. He wears his wealth as unsubtly as possible, with an expensive suit and flashy adornments. His light blonde hair hangs around his face in a style Dazai guesses is supposed to be fashionable but really just makes him have to constantly flick it out of his face.

Dazai had never had the displeasure of meeting Ace before becoming an executive himself. He'd immediately taken a disliking to him. His self-satisfied aura is nauseating. Not to mention that he isn't particularly bright. He can't tell how Mori is simply coddling him to take advantage of him.

Dazai hates Mori, has for years, but Mori is at least competent at his job. He holds a certain respect for him, the way you respect Satan or shinigami. What they do is terrible, but they do it so masterfully that you have to admire it somewhat.

Ace, on the other hand, is like a low-level demon who doesn't realize how far down on the food chain he actually is. That and he never *shuts up*.

They're in the conference room located in the executive suite of the building. It's large for a meeting between only five people, but Mori has never strayed away from the ostentatious. At least the extravagant armchairs they're sitting in are comfortable.

This is the second executive meeting Dazai has attended, though it is the first one where all the executives are present. Mokutaro Kinoshita is sitting in the previously empty seat, now back from his trip overseas. Dazai isn't sure what he thinks of him yet. He's remained quiet for the most part, not that he's been asked to speak much. His face has remained neutral throughout the proceedings, though there is the slightest hint of impatience Dazai catches the longer Ace goes on.

In contrast to Ace, Kinoshita is dressed in a simple black suit, high-end but nothing eye-catching. He doesn't stand out much in general. He has dark eyes and hair, his face slightly serious. He isn't bad looking for someone his age. Dazai is having trouble getting a good read on the man though, which is slightly irritating.

Kouyou had told him Kinoshita was an old acquaintance of Mori's from medical school. After going through the horror of picturing what Mori would be like as a medical professional, Dazai had tried to find out more about Kinoshita. He'd graduated from medical school in Tokyo, but had given up on his practice to work for Mori. Dazai is slightly puzzled by the career change, but he isn't keen to ask the man about it.

There are no formal roles for executives, but they've all settled into their own domains without it being declared. Ace oversees the business related functions of PMR, like sales and shipping. Kouyou had taken over the more delicate work of handling the relationships PMR holds with other companies in and out of the music business. Kinoshita spends most of his time outside of America and is involved in extending PMR's reach internationally. He'd just returned from a trip to Germany, and supposedly speaks an impressive amount of languages. Mori, of course, is in charge of new artist recruitment and the overall direction of the company. He makes it look infuriatingly easy.

That leaves Dazai with the position he's stepped into over the past month, spearheading the marketing department. He's still involved in music production, but now he spends just as much time looking at album covers or refining PR strategies. He's still not exactly sure what had happened to his predecessor, other than the rumors that he'd had a falling out with Mori (not that he really cares all that much). But he'd jumped in where Ishikawa had left out surprisingly easily.

It's odd how much Dazai doesn't hate his new job. He'd mostly expected to, but he finds that he gets a certain satisfaction when all the chess pieces line up as he wants them to, a certain spark of triumph when things go perfectly. He'd gotten the most entertainment sorting out the bits and pieces of music, and this is somewhat similar to that. He's still tweaking songs, he's just adjusting them even beyond the notes.

He's always been observant, and over time he's found how to use those observations to his advantage. Mori had taken that skill and helped him develop it (not that he would ever credit him with it). Now Dazai is taking it farther, finding new ways to get people to think the way he needs them to.

*You're good at marketing because it's lying,* Chuuya says with a scoff in his head, as Dazai recalls the other boy's opinion on his new work. It pulls him out of his musings sharply.

The sound of his voice is, as always, both a very welcome and incredibly unwelcome intrusion. He can't afford to spend time in an executive meeting thinking about it, so he readjusts and starts listening to Ace again.

"We're getting a bit of flack recently from the dock workers about our shipments, but they're easy enough to redirect elsewhere," says Ace, looking to Mori with a slight smirk.

Dazai meets eyes with Kouyou, and for a moment they share a subtle look of shared annoyance. That's been another interesting development of his new position, he now interacts with Kouyou Ozaki more than he ever did before. It's not to say that they've warmed up to each other exactly, but she's certainly the fellow executive that he dislikes the least. They agree on how useless Ace is if nothing else.

"Excellent report," says Mori, giving Ace the praise he'd been clearly seeking. The lie flows from his lips as easily as they always do. "I have a couple ideas I'm juggling with on a long-term solution for that problem, but for now keep on as you have been."

"Will do, Sir," says Ace, leaning back in his chair in a more relaxed position. At least he finally seems to be done talking.

“Kinoshita,” says Mori, turning to the man. His face changes from his fake look of approval into something that might even be slightly genuine (and that definitely warranted further follow up). “We’re thrilled to have you back among us. Was your time in Europe productive?”

“In some ways,” answers Kinoshita, his expression neutral. Dazai is even more annoyed he still can’t get a read on the man. “I still think a more permanent office somewhere out there could be beneficial for us.”

“I’ve had that thought as well,” says Mori, tipping his head in acknowledgment. “It’s more of a manpower issue than anything, plus picking a location. All of those countries just have so many *rules* to navigate.”

Kinoshita nods, leaning forward slightly. “Although everyone everywhere I go still only wants to talk about one thing, Double Black. Interest in an international tour only grows.”

Kinoshita turns to look at Dazai as he speaks, and Dazai smiles brightly instead of showing how his words have made something clench tightly in his chest. But Ace speaks up before Dazai can.

“Album sales haven’t dropped either,” he says, though he seems less happy about it than the other numbers he’d reported. “*Corruption* sales in particular seem to be trending upward rather than tapering off.”

“Good word of mouth,” comments Kouyou lightly, smiling at Ace with just a hint of warning. Although the defense isn’t for his sake, Dazai still appreciates it.

“People are very interested in what is next for Double Black,” says Kinoshita, who still hasn’t stopped looking at Dazai. Dazai is tempted to throw his shoe at him.

“That does leave us with a situation,” says Mori, propping one elbow on the table to lean his head against his hand, drumming his fingers lightly against the table with the other.

“I had an idea about that,” cuts in Dazai. *In adversity there is opportunity*, as Mori used to say to him. He speaks the words confidently, not showing any reaction to the fact that they’re all sitting around discussing him.

“Let’s hear it then,” says Mori, smile taking on a mocking edge that may or may not be visible to the others.

“We should start leaking rumors that Double Black has split up,” says Dazai, keeping his tone completely neutral. “It’ll give us an even bigger spike in sales, people love a good scandal. Then it’ll make the announcement of Chuuya playing with The Black Lizards even bigger news. Kill two birds with one stone.” He doesn’t falter in his delivery, even if Chuuya’s name feels like sandpaper in his throat.

“What should we say caused the split?” asks Mori innocently, and screw Kinoshita if anyone deserves to be hit with his shoe, it’s Mori. Repeatedly.

“Creative differences,” says Dazai easily, smirking at Mori. He sees Kouyou flinch a bit out of the corner of his eye.

Mori smiles back, amused and approving of the plan all at once. “A sound strategy, Dazai. I’d expect nothing less from our newest executive.”

“I still don’t get the logic behind dissolving our most lucrative act,” says Kinoshita, frowning at the two of them.

Dazai almost laughs out loud. Mori and Kinoshita must have quite the relationship for the other man to feel comfortable questioning Mori’s decisions so openly. But he keeps his shock and intrigue to himself. Kouyou is also eying the man carefully. Even Ace seems a little wary of the slight tension in the room.

“It’s a hit in the short-term for a much larger payoff later on,” says Mori, just a touch condescending in the explanation. His smile is hovering somewhere between polite and violent.

“A surrender of one battle to win the war,” says Dazai, echoing Mori’s tone and facial expression perfectly.

“Well put, Dazai,” says Mori. Dazai hates how much Mori’s approval makes him feel satisfied, but the slight frown on Kinoshita’s face makes it more palatable. “Anyway, we’re not giving up on Double Black permanently. There will be a time and place for the next album. For now, we’ve got other artists to develop.”

Kinoshita nods, apparently satisfied with the explanation. Dazai, on the other hand, is fighting off a reaction to the previously unknown information Mori had just revealed, however subtly it had been done. Dazai’s not even sure if Mori’s aware of it. It wouldn’t look right for Dazai to appear satisfied now though, so he leans into the discomfort he feels at being made to discuss Double Black (and it’s not that hard of an act to pull off).

“We’ll give a little bit of time for the news of the split to circulate then start promoting The Black Lizard’s debut album without confirming or denying the split,” says Mori, shifting from his lighter persona to his giving orders one (Dazai prefers this one even if it’s unsettling to most.) “People love a mystery almost as much as a scandal, so we’ll make it both. The Black Lizards are set to release their album early next year.”

“I was under the impression they were still missing a bass guitarist,” says Kouyou, careful to phrase it as non-confrontationally as possible. Her expression is perfectly neutral as well.

“They are, but I’m not worried about it,” says Mori confidently. “There’s always an abundance of rhythm musicians in this city. We’ll scrounge one up quickly I’m sure. The writing for the album is coming together when Kajii and Chuuya can stop trying to rip each other’s heads off long enough to make progress.” Mori sounds amused rather than annoyed at the conflict. “I have to check with Hirotsu, but I feel they’ll be ready to start recording by the end of next month.”



Dazai does not react to Mori's words. He keeps his face politely interested, his body language holds no sign of tension (he might be digging his nails into his fists underneath the table, but no one can see that.)

"That's good news," says Kouyou lightly. "I was afraid they'd start smashing instruments if they were cooped up in that practice room any longer."

Mori grins at the joke slightly before flipping back to his tone for business. "There are a couple of other projects that will have releases soon. Kotaro Takamura is putting the finishing touches on Chieko's Sky, which I'm certain is going to do quite well. It has some rather sentimental bits, but there's some substance and depth in the rest that offsets it. Naoya Shiga's A Dark Night's Passing is set for release in the next couple weeks. A rather grim tone, but it should have its market."

Dazai doesn't bother holding back an eye roll. He's listened to both of the albums and weighed in on some of the editing. He actually agrees with Mori's opinion on Takamura's, a full album dedicated to one person is a bit of a stretch, but it manages to pull it off with a couple more impressive songs. Shiga's album on the other hand is so blatantly trying to be edgy that Dazai finds it unbearable. He knows it'll sell, but he'd rather not listen to it ever again.

"The only other important update is that we've recently signed a new artist named Yumeno Kyusaku," says Mori. "They're young yet, but their voice is astounding. They've chosen Q as a stage name."

"They're also only eight," says Kouyou, making her disapproval clear. She always has been rather touchy about artists releasing music when they're under eighteen.

"I'm not expecting them to release anything immediately," says Mori, smiling slightly. "But age has no effect on talent, and we would be foolish not to take advantage of this new asset."

Kouyou looks ready to add something else but a phone going off stops her. It's Mori's of course, no one else would be stupid enough to leave their volume on during an executive meeting (except maybe Ace). Mori pulls it out and quickly skims the notification with a slight frown.

"I'm afraid I'm going to have to cut this short," announces Mori as he types something into the phone quickly. His voice is light and airy again. "But I think we covered all of the major bases. I'll email you all with any further updates."

Dazai is slightly interested in whatever Mori's phone had told him, but he's even more interested in getting the hell out of there as quickly as possible. This meeting has drained him of almost of all his energy, as long interactions with Mori usually did. He makes his way towards the exit as casually as possible, so as to not look like he's trying to escape. Mori calls out to him just as he reaches the door though.

"Dazai," says Mori. His cheerful tone and smile are back in full force. "Can you let Chuuya know about the approach to the Double Black split?" The words sound so innocuous, so

unlike the direct stab to the gut that the are. “If you see him, of course,” adds Mori, twisting the knife.

“Sure thing, Boss,” says Dazai easily, giving Mori a matching smile. “If I see him.”

Dazai doesn’t slam the door as he walks out, but it’s a near thing. The only thing that stops him is that he doesn’t want to give Mori the satisfaction. He lets the scowl he’s been holding back out as he walks from the meeting room to his office.

Mori’s taunt causes as much damage as it does because there is a distinct chance that Dazai *won’t* see him.

Despite Chuuya’s initial reaction to being put with The Black Lizards (that Dazai does not think about every day, multiple times a day), the next day it had been like a switch had been flipped. He had jumped straight into the project without any hesitation, giving the band all of his attention and dedication. He’d enthusiastically picked up the guitar again, and started listening to hours and hours of rock music to “get in the right head space.”

Dazai keeps reminding himself this is a good thing. If Chuuya had resisted his assignment, it would have been bad. *I think it would be best if there were a little more distance between you two professionally*, repeats Mori in his head, always lingering over the last word a little (though that’s probably Dazai projecting).

Chuuya also seems to not hold anything against Mori for his part in splitting up Double Black. The two are chummier than ever, especially now that Chuuya gives Elise piano lessons frequently. He sometimes sees them around the office, and Chuuya looks completely at ease talking with their boss.

Dazai has to bite his tongue to stop himself from saying something. He still remembers the blowout fight they’d had on tour about Mori. He’s not looking for a repeat. He’d gotten so outraged he’d almost blurted out, *he’s the reason you and I can’t be anything*. He’d narrowly avoided that disaster.

If it weren’t for Mori, Dazai wouldn’t have to hide how he feels. Dazai had created a rule for himself very early on in his career at Port Mafia Records, after seeing Mori ruthlessly take down his own employees for his own gain, never show something you desire in front of Mori. That’s how Mori got you, he found out what you wanted most and then dangled it in front of you to get you to do what he needed.

Before leaving for tour, Dazai had thought he could get a hold of his feelings, control his fledgling attraction and put it behind him as a simple adolescent daydream.

After tour, he no longer holds such delusions. Spending every day with Chuuya, sharing a stage (and more) with him, Chuuya being devastatingly honest with him no matter what it cost him, there had been no way to come through that unscathed. One of the worst aftereffects is how Dazai now feels strange waking up in his apartment alone, colder without the presence of Chuuya beside him.

The specific moment when he had realized he was doomed is mortifying both because of how it happened and how early into the tour it was. It had been after a show in Phoenix, a little over a week after they'd left L.A. Dazai had finished showering and was lying on a couch in his dressing room when Chuuya had burst in, talking about the show in his usual post-concert adrenaline rush and waving a water bottle in his hand as he talked.

Dazai had been debating between asking where Chuuya got the water or manipulating Chuuya into giving him some of it, shows always left him slightly dehydrated. Then he'd been caught off guard when the water bottle smacked into his forehead.

"Got you a water," Chuuya had said, laughing both at landing the hit and his clearly bewildered expression.

*Got you a water*; that's what felled him. Chuuya, practically glowing with excitement after a show and getting Dazai what he'd wanted before he'd even known it, and effortlessly too. Dazai had given some snarky reply about slugs that he doesn't remember, but on the inside he had been reeling, thinking *oh fuck*.

Dazai unfortunately hasn't been able to lie to himself that Chuuya doesn't feel something back ever since his seventeenth birthday when Chuuya had declared how much he cared with the earnestness of a song that torments Dazai to this very day. It had been possibly the best and worst day of his life. Chuuya had given him a gift that still brings a smile to his face whenever he thinks about it. But afterwards when he'd dragged Chuuya into that storage closet he hadn't been able to stop his gaze from slipping downward from Chuuya's eyes, he'd barely held back from pulling him in and ruining everything in the heat of the moment. He'd almost thrown everything away in a burst of desperation because of how badly he'd wanted it. Thank god Chuuya had been the smart one for once and left the enclosed space before things went any further.

But while his heart is the most useless organ in his body, his brain picks up the slack. He's been careful not to end up in any other situations like that again. There are so few things in his life he actually cares to keep, and he will not let this one break due to recklessness.

Of course, that had been more of a problem when he actually saw Chuuya regularly. Ever since getting back from tour and his new promotion he's seen Chuuya only sporadically. After the way Chuuya had protested to them being separated so adamantly, Dazai had been caught off guard when Chuuya had abruptly pulled away in the following weeks.

Not that Chuuya is avoiding him exactly, he does have a lot on his plate. The Black Lizards is full of explosive personalities and constant conflict. Chuuya and Motojiro Kajii do not get along, to put it mildly. Chuuya generally refers to him as "that Lemon Fucker" and when Dazai does see him it always involves a long rant about the other man.

(Dazai would think it were hilarious if he didn't want to murder Kajii for getting to write and play music with Chuuya and not even appreciating it.)

Dazai has never worked with Kajii personally, but he's heard the stories about how eccentric he is. He's a talented musician, but he's also a hotheaded maniac. He holds the record for the

most damaged instruments at PMR, and Dazai isn't sure how many of those had been accidents and how many had been on purpose.

Chuuya and Kajii's main issue comes down to how different their approaches to music are. Chuuya had burst into Dazai's office after one of their first practices together and immediately started complaining about it.

"He thinks I'm "too soft" to be in his rock band," Chuuya had said furiously. He had paced back and forth in front of Dazai's desk and waved his hands angrily. "Can you fucking believe that? Me? Too *soft*? I bet he's never even been in an actual fight."

It had only escalated from there. The band spent as much time arguing as they did actually writing music, possibly even more. Chuuya and Kajii couldn't seem to agree on anything, and Tachihara has a temper as well, so screaming matches between the three of them weren't out of the ordinary. Dazai's pretty sure they would have killed each other if it weren't for Hirotsu steering them with his cold resolve (although Dazai has never seen the man more stressed out.)

Dazai had offered to do something about it in the beginning, but Chuuya had shut him down swiftly and forcefully.

"Don't touch my band, mackerel," he's said, tone leaving no room for argument, finger pointed at him in warning.

Dazai had felt a strange twinge of uneasiness at the command, but he'd followed it. Chuuya is just going along with what Mori had told them to do, what Dazai had agreed with, putting distance between them. It still feels wrong not to be involved in the music Chuuya is writing though.

Apparently this order even extended to marketing because when Dazai had weighed in on a color scheme for a potential album cover Chuuya had replied to the email (that hadn't even been addressed to him) **STAY OUT OF MY BAND ASSHOLE**. So now Dazai doesn't touch anything having to do with The Black Lizards.

Even back before they'd worked together (although that seems much longer than over a year ago) Dazai had still seen Chuuya around the office or broken into his apartment at night. Now that he's up in the executive suite he's nowhere near where Chuuya is practicing with The Black Lizards, and he simply doesn't have the time to laze around in Chuuya's dorm like he used to. Dazai barely has a minute to himself most days, being an executive is more work than he'd realized it would be.

It's slightly infuriating. He's never had to *ask* Chuuya where he is going to be before. He'd always known, and it had always been expected that they'd eventually end up in the same place. Now if he wants to talk to him to tell him what's going on before Mori beats him to it he's going to have to rearrange his entire schedule for the day (the thought makes him a lot less annoyed than it should).

Dazai is calculating which of his meetings he's least interested in as he opens the door to his office. It's another one of the things he doesn't hate about his new position. The executive

suite is only accessible by those who have permission, so he doesn't have to worry about being bothered by anyone. It gives him the chance to actually be productive.

That's why the sight of someone already in his office catches him off guard. It takes him a moment to even notice the other person lounging in one of the cheap lawn chairs near the windows (that Dazai keeps for the express purpose of people's reactions to them compared to the rest of the upscale office).

"Oh, hey," says Chuuya brightly. He looks surprised to see him (despite the fact that this is *his* office.)

Dazai has always been rather captivated by Chuuya's singing, but now even just his normal speaking voice is starting to affect him (he's becoming horrendously pathetic). It takes him a split second to recover, to roll his eyes and stroll over to Chuuya like the sight and sound of him hasn't made all the negative feelings he'd been carrying from the unbearable meeting he's just suffered through evaporate instantly.

Dazai eyes the two styrofoam containers next to Chuuya as he takes a seat in the other lawn chair. It's more comfortable than the plush armchair he'd just been sitting in. "Did you get lost, chibi? This is my office, not the lunch room."

Chuuya smirks and tosses one of the containers at him, and Dazai has to scramble to catch it before it spills all over his floor. That makes Chuuya laugh as he picks up his own container.

Dazai opens the container to check the contents. It's from one of the food carts a couple blocks away that Chuuya likes. He used to drag Dazai there with him back when they were writing the album. Chuuya's filled the box with Dazai's favorites from there, glazed fruit, fried doughnuts, egg rolls. It's food Chuuya's always referred to as junk and a waste of money. The gesture makes Dazai clutch his plastic fork a little too tightly.

"Kouyou mentioned she almost never sees you leave your office," says Chuuya, sounding slightly annoyed and judgmental at the same time. "And knowing you, I bet there's barely any food in your apartment." He glares at Dazai as he digs into his own container of (much healthier) meat and vegetables.

"Usually it's the master who has to feed the dog," says Dazai, smirking at Chuuya. He takes a large bite of an egg roll, more hungry than he'd realized.

"Fuck off," says Chuuya, rolling his eyes. "I was going to eat in here to get some peace and quiet after listening to the lemon fucker screech for hours this morning. I thought you'd be in that executive meeting. I was going to leave that trash you call food on the desk."

"We finished up early," says Dazai, even more grateful they had than earlier.

Chuuya pauses eating to give him a searching look, eyes narrowed. "What's wrong?"

It's becoming rather eerie how well Chuuya can read him with barely any effort. Dazai hadn't let a single slip of emotion into his voice or face, yet Chuuya could still tell something was off.

Dazai knows he should tell Chuuya the news right away. But he'd naively wanted just a couple minutes of peace first, he'd wanted to just enjoy this unexpected offering without bringing up the reasons why it's so unexpected. He lets go of that want, internally sighing.

"Double Black split up due to creative differences," says Dazai flatly, looking Chuuya directly in the eye. "That's the angle we've decided on, creates more intrigue."

Chuuya doesn't react in anger like he'd guessed he would though. Instead he lets out a quick snort, a strange smile on his face. "I'm guessing I'm the jilted party then?"

"What?" asks Dazai, too surprised to hide the hint of distress in the question. He quickly readjusts so his next sentence comes out normally. "No. It was mutual."

Chuuya hums but changes the subject. "What did you think of Kinoshita? People from the Southeast Asian office really like him."

Dazai is torn between going back to the issue and being impressed how well-informed Chuuya always seems to be. Dazai has to work to keep up to date on everything going on at PMR, but information seems to just end up in Chuuya's lap. He's stupidly well liked by everyone he meets.

"He's interesting," answers Dazai. He would rather enjoy Chuuya's presence than start a fight in the little time they are together. "Very quiet. I'm not sure how someone goes from being a doctor to being a record company executive."

"Maybe he discovered the therapeutic value of music," says Chuuya sarcastically.

It's a terrible joke, and Dazai is very glad no one else can see how widely he's smiling at it.

He doesn't tell Chuuya the most interesting thing about Kinoshita is that he'd unknowingly gotten Mori to disclose the details Dazai had been missing. After over a month of searching, he finally knows what it'll take for Mori to allow him and Chuuya to work together again. Port Mafia Records needs a new breakout act before returning to the old one.

Dazai puts it to the back of his mind for the rest of their impromptu lunch. But eventually Chuuya gets dragged back to writing with The Black Lizards, muttering curses under his breath as he goes. The air in the room feels staler after he's left.

Dazai has something to focus on to take the edge off though. He's not going to sit back and wait for Mori to develop his next successful artist, that could take years. Dazai had already been looking into a set of siblings for possible recruitment, but perhaps it's time for him to step into a mentorship role.

Dazai will do whatever is necessary to make Double Black get green lit for another album, no matter how unpleasant.

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## **Late November, Ten Months Since the Release of Corruption**

Chuuya can't deny that Ryuunosuke Akutagawa is incredibly talented.

Chuuya's watching the vocal training session from the back of the room, leaning against the wall near the door. Neither Akutagawa or Dazai had noticed him come in, so he'd taken the chance to get a good listen to Port Mafia Record's newest singer.

He had been more than a little shocked when Dazai had taken the lead training Akutagawa. But after signing him last month, Dazai had started working with the other boy himself instead of assigning him to someone else. Despite having the most insane schedule Chuuya has ever seen, Dazai somehow manages to find time to work with Akutagawa with a strange amount of dedication for someone who is usually fairly apathetic about others' music.

Chuuya has spent more time with his older sister, Gin. She'd taken the spot as their missing bass player in The Black Lizards.

He had texted Dazai immediately upon hearing the news, **what part of staying the fuck out of my band did you not understand?**

To which Dazai had replied almost instantly, **I simply recruited a bass player for Port Mafia Records. I didn't assign her to your little band. My hands are clean.**

**You're so full of shit,** had been Chuuya's response.

Dazai had been the one to agree to this fucking separation without any protest, so Chuuya doesn't understand why he can't stay out of his business. Chuuya certainly doesn't interfere with any of his stupid marketing bullshit.

It's hard to stay mad at Dazai about it when Gin is as skilled as she is. Chuuya has never really had any interest in the bass guitar, but he knows enough to recognize how much of a grounding presence she's brought to their music.

Unlike her brother, Gin doesn't speak up much. She's more likely to sit and watch an argument silently than to get involved. Even if you asked for her opinion, she usually says she doesn't care about the thing they've been fighting about it.

Chuuya doesn't really mind her, he thinks she's ten times more tolerable than fucking Kajii. Unfortunately Tachihara doesn't share the feeling.

Tachihara can't stand Gin. He claims she's trying to "control the flow" of the music.

"The drums lead the fucking beat," he'd yelled in one of their practice sessions, almost throwing one of his drumsticks with his wild gesturing. "Stop fucking trying to start your own rhythm!"

"Well maybe if you did a better job of leading I wouldn't have to do it myself," Gin had replied lowly, dark eyes showing anger instead of her usual nonchalance.

So now Tachihara is just as likely to storm out of the room as Chuuya and Kajii are (Gin never has.)

Instead of being less productive, they're finally starting to get close to finishing the album somehow. A lot of it had already been written by Kajii before they'd even started. And

Chuuya has had to fight him every step of the way to get him to change anything.

It's different than arguing with Dazai about music had been. With Dazai, he'd always felt like no matter how nasty things got or much they screamed, they were still on the same team in the end, that they had the same goal. Even when Chuuya lost an argument he'd known that the music wasn't going to suffer for it.

That's not how it feels like with The Black Lizards. Chuuya gets that it's a different genre than he's used to writing, but that doesn't mean he doesn't know what he's talking about. *He's* the one with a bestselling album. But Kajii is one of the first people at PMR who has looked down at Chuuya and treats him like some bratty kid.

Not to mention how many times Chuuya has tried to describe something or written something for the group and they just don't *fucking get it*. He's never been as frustrated as when he can't put into words what he's talking about. It's music, he doesn't know how to explain it.

That had never been a problem with Dazai. It makes the fact that they're saying *creative differences* is the "cause" of their split hilarious in a twisted kind of way. It's better to laugh about it than to break something over it at least.

But Chuuya can't change what's happened, so he tries to focus on what's in front of him. Just because he hates Kajii doesn't mean he necessarily doesn't enjoy playing with The Black Lizards. Chuuya has spent most of his time these past months trying to get reacquainted with playing the guitar after he'd mostly focused on the piano the last couple years. It's been a challenge, and Chuuya has always loved a good challenge.

He tries to keep busy when he's not at PMR. He and Tachihara have become closer than they used to be, even outside of the band. Tachihara keeps trying to get him to come out with the group of musicians he's been hanging out with since they got back from tour, but Chuuya keeps shutting him down. He either feels too drained or too pissed off at the end of their sessions when Tachihara asks him, and he knows he wouldn't be very good company.

He's been giving Elise piano lessons. She spends a lot of their sessions talking his ear off instead of actually playing. It's kind of endearing though. She's a sharp kid. He catches up with Mori when he drops by to check on Elise's progress, and they talk about music and PMR business. It had been a little hard the first couple times he'd seen him after he got shoved into The Black Lizards, but Chuuya has let pretty much all of his resentment go. He knows Mori had just done what he had thought was best for PMR. Chuuya can't hold that against him.

Chuuya spends a lot of time listening to music. He's listened to more rock music since September than he probably has in his entire life. Chuuya actually really likes the majority of it, but he can't help but feel a little caged in by it. He used to be able to write whatever came to him without any regard to the genre. Kouyou had made that comment that it was helping him to grow as a songwriter. Chuuya had just given her a deeply unimpressed look.

He tries to avoid writing things that wouldn't fit the band, but there's an ever-growing pile of lyrics and melodies he has stuffed into a drawer in his dorm (okay, so they're all written for a duo, but Chuuya can't control what his fucking mind comes up with.)



Lately he's been listening to a bunch of French music in addition to all the rock. Arthur had sent it to him. He'd already liked Victor Hugo, but he'd never really listened to Marcel Proust or Emile Zola before. He finds himself humming *Love Is A Reciprocal Torture* and *J'Accuse* throughout the day. But he doesn't feel like he's going to truly appreciate it unless he understands the language more, so he's picked up a couple of books on how to speak French that he's trying to muddle his way through.

His relationship with Arthur Rimbaud is complicated. After Arthur had reached out in May on a day Chuuya tries not to dwell on too much, Chuuya has gradually let go of the anger he'd held onto from their initial meeting. It had started out with simple texts here and there, usually just about music and nothing straying into anything personal. They had still been pretty infrequent when they'd gotten back from tour.

Then one day after a truly enraging and useless session with The Black Lizards, Arthur had sent him a text while Chuuya was still at the height of his anger and Chuuya had hit the call button before thinking about it too hard. Arthur had answered, and before he could say anything Chuuya had launched into a rant about the entire experience.

Arthur had listened without comment until Chuuya was done complaining. Then he'd simply said in his deep and serious voice, "It sounds like that Kajii fellow has a couple screws loose."

Chuuya had paused, then had burst out in laughter. It had taken him a minute to get a hold of himself again. Arthur had stayed quiet while he did. Chuuya had thanked him after catching his breath, and they'd ended the call shortly after.

But from then on he's found himself talking to Arthur more and more. It's nice to have someone impartial to be able to talk to without any competing interests or agendas. Arthur doesn't do much more than listen, but his steady presence on the other end of the phone has been one of the only things keeping him sane.

Hirotsu also attempts to keep him from getting arrested for murder, although he tries not to play favorites (but while the others aren't looking he always gives Chuuya subtle looks that convey that he's on his side). Kouyou helps too when she has the time. She's still as busy as ever though. Chuuya ambushes her into having tea with him when he can.

Honestly, everything he does is pretty much all just bullshit to distract himself from how much he wishes Dazai was there.

Chuuya loathes every second of it, but he's been keeping his distance from Dazai. It's frustrating being the orchestrator of his own misery, but it's hardly the hardest thing he's ever had to suffer through (it's fairly high up on the list though.)

But Chuuya knows how to follow orders, and he'd taken Mori's to heart. He wanted distance between Double Black, he'd get his fucking distance. Chuuya figures the fastest way to get back to playing with Dazai is by going along with what Mori wants.

The whole thing actually makes him think back to what the asshole Count said, *People are going to be watching you if you're on stage or off. You are always performing.*

Chuuya is kind of cheating though and allows himself to see Dazai once in a while when their schedules miraculously align and he doesn't think anyone else will be around. He's also started leaving food for the dumbass in his office because despite being a musical genius he seems to have no concept of basic self-care.

Chuuya's only spent a handful of moments with Dazai in the couple months since they got back from tour (sixty eight days, it's been sixty eight days), but those short and pointless encounters have been the only times Chuuya has felt truly at ease.

(If Chuuya had thought for a second that being apart from Dazai would change how he feels about him, he would have been viciously and humiliatingly wrong.)

Even if Chuuya had been seeking Dazai out as much as he wanted to, Dazai is obnoxiously busy. Dazai's life is a constant stream of meetings and phone calls and not nearly enough actual music in Chuuya's opinion.

Although that's changed slightly since Ryuunosuke's entered the picture. Chuuya's actually bending his own rules by crashing this vocal training session, but he'd left during the middle of today's practice with The Black Lizards so dissatisfied and restless that he hadn't been able to help himself when he'd passed by this practice room and heard the sound of Dazai's voice coming from inside.

Plus he can admit he's insanely curious to hear what Ryuunosuke Akutagawa sounds like. Despite only being at PMR for a month, he's already garnered quite the reputation. From what Chuuya's heard, he's got a unique voice and unique personality, a rather caustic one that hasn't made him very popular.

From the short time he's been observing Dazai and Akutagawa, he can confirm both the rumors are true. Dazai has the other boy practicing using *Golden Demon*, which is a complicated song even for those who have been singing professionally for years. It's not what Chuuya would have picked for a rookie. He has to admire Akutagawa for giving it his all.

But Akutagawa's bratty temperament and excuses keep Chuuya from being too impressed.

"You're not hitting the notes right," says Dazai for the third time since Chuuya has entered the room. "It's *Everyone says that it's a smart match*," sings Dazai, voice so clear and smooth Chuuya clenches his fists a little. "Not *Everyone says that it's a smart match*." He sings the same line again with slightly different inflections.

"Those sound exactly the same," says Akutagawa, scowling and crossing his arms.

"They really don't," says Dazai, impatience clear in his voice. He rubs his eyes with his hand and sighs. "Get some water," he directs Akutagawa. "Hopefully the break will help you to become less incompetent."

Akutagawa doesn't reply but his scowl deepens. He walks away from the microphone to the water cooler in the room, coughing slightly. It's not the first time he's coughed since Chuuya has been watching, although it never seemed to happen while he's singing.

Chuuya takes the opportunity to leave his spot to approach Dazai from behind. Dazai has taken a seat in one of the chairs in the room and is flipping through a sheet of papers and making tiny notes on them, so he doesn't see Chuuya coming.

"Should we be worried about all that coughing?" asks Chuuya once he reaches him, leaning against the back of the chair. He smiles down at Dazai from his position above him.

Dazai's expression as he turns is annoyed, but then his eyes widen when he realizes who he is. He's caught off guard enough that Chuuya can catch how pleased Dazai is before he can school his expression into an annoyed one again. Chuuya's smile only grows, that reaction had made this whole thing worth it.

"It's not something we can do anything about," says Dazai, turning his body to the side so he can face Chuuya. "He saw a doctor right after we signed him, and they said it was an aftereffect from living somewhere with mold for so long and that it should go away on its own. It hasn't affected his singing at all."

"He's a real piece of work," says Chuuya lowly enough that only Dazai can hear him.

Dazai laughs (and that sound is better than most music). "His unfortunate personality doesn't matter to me as long as he can sing."

"I'm not sure his voice has matured enough even if you train him extensively," says Chuuya, voicing what'd he'd been thinking as he listened. While PMR had a good track record of working with younger artists, not everyone's voice had finished developing by age fifteen. "He might need some more time before it reaches its peak richness."

Dazai's expression changes into a more genuinely annoyed one. "If I'm not allowed to touch The Black Lizards, you don't get to tell me how to run my projects."

Chuuya rolls his eyes but doesn't argue. Dazai does have a point. If he wants to waste his time, that's his decision.

Chuuya stops leaning against the chair and is torn between lingering or going back to the practice he'd ditched. The longer he waits the more pissed Hirotsu is likely to get. But he could probably squeeze out a few more minutes.

"I think Akutagawa is a lot more tolerable than Motojiro Kajii anyway," says Dazai, voice and expression innocent, but there's a gleam of mischief in his eyes that brings a smile to Chuuya's face despite himself.

There are a lot of things he could say to Dazai. *I hate Kajii for a lot of reasons, but the thing I hate the most about him is that he's not you* is one. *I'm trying to learn French to distract myself from how much I can't stand not seeing you* is another. If he were being truly honest he could say *I would rather sing Corruption every day if it meant we could go back to the way things were*.

Luckily his phone buzzes and keeps him from saying anything too stupid. He pulls it out to check it, already frowning before he even reads it.

**[1:16pm Hirotsu]: Stop throwing a temper tantrum and get back here.**

It's the fourth time since he'd left that Hirotsu had texted him, which means the old man has probably reached the end of his patience. Chuuya sighs and shoves his phone back into his pocket. He should really get back.

"I didn't mean you have to leave," says Dazai, noticing his shift in body language. Dazai keeps his tone casual, but Chuuya can hear how much he truly means it.

"I have to," says Chuuya, giving Dazai a look that makes it clear how much he would rather stay. "I ditched practice and Hirotsu'll lecture me to death if I don't go back."

"Oh," says Dazai blankly. He slips into his fake cheerful smile and voice. "Have a good practice then. Try not to kill your bandmates!"

Chuuya ruffles Dazai's hair in revenge until Dazai pushes his hand away roughly. "Get out of here and keep your slug germs to yourself," he whines.

"Later, mackerel," calls out Chuuya as he leaves, looking back long enough to catch the slight raise of Dazai's lips before he leaves the rooms.

Chuuya's own smile slips off his face the closer he gets to where said bandmates he's not allowed to kill are waiting for him. He flings the door open when he reaches it, the smack it makes against the wall makes him feel a tiny bit better.

No one has moved much from the positions they had been in when Chuuya left. Usually bands at PMR use whatever practice rooms are available depending on scheduling, but after they'd dented the walls several times they had become the sole users of this one.

Tachihara is sitting behind his drum set, doing something on his phone. He's put headphones on to drown out the rest of the room. Gin is in the corner, strumming lightly on the bass guitar she'd brought with her when she came to PMR. Its black exterior is old and falling apart, but she'd refused to play a different one. Her guitar isn't plugged in, so she's the only one who can hear the light notes she's playing.

Hirotsu looks up when he walks in the room, his cold gaze showing what he thinks of Chuuya's absence. It makes Chuuya feel slightly guilty, but not enough to regret taking a break.

"The prodigal son returns," says Kajii sarcastically, lounging on the one couch in the room. His mocking smile makes Chuuya want to knock his teeth in. "Hurray."

"Shut up," says Chuuya flatly. He nods to Hirotsu as he walks across the room to pick up his guitar where he'd left it on the floor. It doesn't appear to be damaged at all, and Chuuya is relieved he doesn't have to get a new one again.

Kajii stands up and makes his way over to the microphone. "Now that Baby Red is here, let's see if we can get through an entire fucking song without him spazzing out."

Chuuya gives him the finger as he slips under his guitar strap with the other hand. Gin also gets back into place, face as impassive as ever. Tachihara sighs under his breath as he puts his phone away and picks up his sticks.

Hirotsu gives Chuuya another warning look as he takes a seat on the couch Kajii vacated and pulls out his laptop to start working on something.

“Alright, losers,” says Kajii, adjusting his microphone. “How about we play *Lemon Bomb* again and try not to butcher it this time?”

Chuuya has to bite his tongue to stop himself from snapping back. But he holds his temper in check and waits for Tachihara to strike his sticks to set the beat.

Chuuya strums along to the opening of the song, not deviating from the notes Kajii insists on this time (even though Chuuya thinks his version adds more nuance to the sound but what the fuck ever.) The song has a classic rock feel to it, and the drums and guitars build as Kajii starts the first verse.

*An impenetrable curse lays heavy on my heart*

*How shall I describe my feelings of disgust?*

*Call it uneasiness, call it ill humors*

*It's a crushing weight from which I can't adjust*

Even though Chuuya knows he's a better singer than Kajii, he can't deny the Kajii's deeper and less polished delivery is a way better fit here.

*“But I've found the solution,” croons Kajii. “I've found salvation. It's a tiny yellow miracle, that will take this darkness and bring it to ruination.”*

The music gets more chaotic and louder as they get to the chorus. Chuuya can't help the slight spike of adrenaline he gets as they play, Kajii belting out the lyrics now. Tachihara strikes the drums enthusiastically while Gin keeps playing the unwavering bass line. Chuuya plays at the pace they set, way more in sync now than they'd been earlier today.

*So light it all up, blow it all away*

*Curses can't kill you as your body fades to gray*

*The only thing we'll leave is corpses to embalm*

*Blast it sky high with the Lemon Bomb*

*"The Lemon Bomb,"* repeats Kajii, drawing out the last word, his voice resounding skillfully.

They're ready to launch into the second verse when Hirotsu cuts them off, standing up in the front of the room and holding up a hand to get their attention. Tachihara is the only one who doesn't notice and keeps playing, the drums echoing loudly in the room without the other instruments.

"Hey, moron," says Gin, raising her voice over the sound. "Did you not notice you're the only one still playing?"

Tachihara pauses with his drumsticks still in midair. He looks up and notices everyone watching him, his face flushing with embarrassment and anger. "Shut up, freak. It's called getting lost in the music."

Gin rolls her eyes but stays quiet, turning her attention back to Hirotsu.

"Sorry to interrupt," says the old man, though he doesn't sound very sorry. "But I just got some news from Mori. We're set to start recording next week."

"We're not even done writing," protests Chuuya right away, not getting the boss's logic in rushing them. The others seem equally confused.

"Mori feels that we're close enough," says Hirotsu, shrugging slightly. "And that giving us a deadline will force us to stop dawdling and infighting."

Chuuya scowls at that, clenching the neck of his guitar tighter. Nobody argues with the statement though.

"There's more," announces Hirotsu, and this time he seems more apprehensive. "Mori's scheduled us for release in early February next year." Hirotsu pauses for a moment, almost seeming to force his next words out. "And to promote the album, he's putting together a tour also beginning in February."

"You have got to be fucking kidding me," says Chuuya before he can help himself. Kajii bursts out in laughter next to him, clutching the microphone stand to hold himself up.

Gin and Tachihara don't seem to know what to think, but they exchange wary glances that Chuuya catches out of the corner of his eye.

"It's no joke," says Hirotsu, tone slightly strained. "So we don't have time for any more delays or outbursts, not if we want to be ready by then."

"You hear that, Baby Red?" asks Kajii, still chuckling. "We don't have time for any more of your diva meltdowns."

Chuuya could point out that Kajii had been the one to storm out of the room just as fucking often as he had, but he's still too shocked about the news that they're going on tour. Knowing Mori they'd be gone at least six months.

Chuuya had never even considered the possibility of touring without Dazai before, and it isn't a concept he finds remotely appealing.

Hirotsu seems to take pity on them, noticing their less than enthusiastic reactions. "We'll call it a day for now and start fresh in the morning."

"Thanks, gramps," says Tachihara, obviously trying to cut some of the tension in the room. He stashes his sticks in the holder and pulls out his phone again.

Hirotsu nods in acknowledgment then goes back to looking at his laptop, typing quickly. He's probably trying to find a way to manage this shit show somehow.

Kajii makes for the door without any hesitation, calling out as he leaves, "Later, munchkins." He's clearly the only one who's ecstatic about the news.

Chuuya resists the urge to yell something nasty back. He thinks it's funny that Kajii is two years older than Kouyou but so much less mature. Jesus fucking Christ he's going to have to spend every day for *six months* with him. He can't even begin to start wrapping his head around the idea.

"He's a prick, but he does know music," says Tachihara, walking around the drums to come stand next to him. "Your version was more complex, but that's not necessarily what we're going for here."

"Could we not talk about the Lemon Fucker for like five fucking minutes?" asks Chuuya irritably. He pulls off his guitar strap and sets the instrument down in its holder. Just because Tachihara's right doesn't mean it's any easier for Chuuya to swallow.

"You should come out with us tonight," says Tachihara, not put off by Chuuya's anger. "Me and the Brontës, Jane, and Charlie are getting drinks. It'd be a good way to blow off some steam."

Normally this would be the part where Chuuya would make some excuse to ditch, but today the idea of tour still has him rattled enough that he's considering it. It's not like he had anything better to do in his dorm besides sulk over this new turn of events.

"Sure," says Chuuya with a sigh. Tachihara's face immediately lights up. "Gin, you want to come?" Tachihara's happiness turns to a glare but Chuuya doesn't mind him.

"No," says Gin shortly, putting her bass into a case carefully instead of leaving it out. She leaves the room without another word, only nodding to Hirotsu as she goes.

"Oh no," says Tachihara sarcastically. "What a shame. She's such a joy to be around."

Chuuya snorts and makes to leave the room too, Tachihara trailing behind him.

Hirotsu looks up from his computer as they're passing. "Chuuya, I need you to come in early tomorrow. We have things we need to discuss."

“Fine,” says Chuuya, trying to keep how annoyed he is out of his voice. It figures that Kajii is the asshole but he’s the one who’s going to end up getting the lecture. “I’ll see you then, geezer.”

“Use some judgement while you’re out,” says Hirotsu as a farewell, going back to his work.

Tachihara calls out a goodbye and the man raises a hand as they exit the room, walking towards the building’s exit together.

“You know,” says Tachihara, “No one else gets away with talking to him like that.”

“You call him gramps all the time,” points out Chuuya.

“Yeah, and he does not like it,” says Tachihara, laughing a little. “He doesn’t mind it when you talk back.”

“Whatever,” says Chuuya, rolling his eyes.

“You’re in a real mood,” observes Tachihara. “You shouldn’t let Kajii get to you so easily.”

“Like you’re one to talk,” shoots back Chuuya. “You and Gin are always at each other’s throats.”

“She starts it,” says Tachihara, scowling and holding up a hand in protest. “I mean, I try to cut her some slack because I know she’s a street kid, but she’s just so freaking arrogant. She’s a decent bass player, I’ll give her that, but it takes more than skill to be part of a band.”

Chuuya’s not sure arrogant is a word he’d use to describe Gin. She never acts like she’s better than anyone else, she just points out when Tachihara is doing something wrong. But that’s not the part of what Tachihara had said that he’s stuck on. “What do you mean she’s a street kid?”

“It’s pretty obvious that her and her brother weren’t in the best situation before they got signed,” says Tachihara, looking surprised Chuuya hadn’t known this. “Then there’s the shitty guitar she’s so attached to, her fidgetiness around so many new people, the fact that she dresses like that.”

Gin did tend to dress rather uniquely. She always ties her hair up in a spiky bun, letting a few strands hang in her face. Her clothes are usually dark and long, covering up most of her skin. Chuuya had just thought that was her style.

“Huh,” he says, frowning at his own self-centeredness. Gin had been just like him and he’d been so melodramatic about his own problems he hadn’t even noticed.

“Don’t beat yourself up about it,” says Tachihara, catching onto his guilty expression. “She’d gut you if you ever brought it up to her. She’s not looking for sympathy.”

“I’ve been a little preoccupied lately,” says Chuuya, shaking his head. They reach the door to the building and walk out, pausing in front of the entrance before they go their separate ways.



Tachihara snorts. “Yeah, I know. I’m shocked you’re finally pulling your head out of your ass to come have fun later.”

Chuuya rolls his eyes but smiles a bit. Then his smile fades as he says, “I can’t believe we’re going on tour so soon.”

“It’s really not that surprising,” says Tachihara, though he’s not smiling either.

“I thought they’d hold off a bit,” says Chuuya, frowning at the logic behind the choice. “I was under the impression the rushed Double Black tour was out of the ordinary.”

“It was,” says Tachihara slowly, narrowing his eyes. “But that’s why they’re rushing this one too, because of you.”

“What?” asks Chuuya, crossing his arms. “I didn’t do anything.”

“I know,” says Tachihara, rolling his eyes. “But everyone is still obsessed with Double Black, so it makes sense for us to capitalize on that interest by touring as soon as we can.”

“Oh,” says Chuuya, feeling stupid for not seeing it sooner.

“Stop fucking pouting,” says Tachihara, shoving him slightly. “Sure, Kajii and Gin will be there, but we’ll still have a blast. You love touring.”

Chuuya *did* love touring. He really did owe it to the band to stop being such a fucking brat if it’s his fault they’re doing this.

“Yeah, yeah,” says Chuuya, waving a hand dismissively. “I’ll see you later. Text me the details.”

“Later, Baby Red,” says Tachihara with a smirk as he turns to go.

Chuuya flips him off with both hands as he walks towards his dorm. Tachihara laughs as he walks towards his own apartment.

Any happiness Chuuya slips away as soon as he’s alone though. His third tour he’s been a part of in three years, but he’s not looking forward to this one like he had the others.

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## **December, Ten and a Half Months Since the Release of Corruption**

It’s strange how Dazai is getting such a thrill out of something that had once been part of his daily routine, but he can’t stop the feeling he gets as he breaks into Chuuya’s third floor dorm. Dazai hasn’t even been here since they got back from tour, it feels like coming home more than going to his own apartment has these past few months.

Dazai has to struggle to open the door without dropping the things he’d holding, but he manages it without spilling too much. He licks the ice cream that has flowed off onto his hands as he slams the door behind him.

The sound echos in the tiny dorm. Dazai knows Chuuya is home, he'd checked his phone's GPS before he'd left the office (if Chuuya gets to have Kouyou spy on Dazai, it's only fair that Dazai gets to track his phone.)

It's like walking into a memory. Very little has changed, Chuuya's stuff is still all over the place. It brings an automatic smile to Dazai's face. There are a couple of new additions though. There's a bottle of wine sitting out on Chuuya's counter, and a couple of books on French of all things catch Dazai's eye.

He's kept from examining them further when Chuuya appears in the hallway, ready to yell at whoever has broken into his dorm. It's clear from the look on his face he hadn't been expecting it to be Dazai.

Dazai would say something mocking him if he wasn't as thrown off by Chuuya's appearance. He's wearing a pair of red leather pants and a black tank top that clings to his body, his hair hanging loosely around his face in slight curls under his signature hat. His black choker still hangs around his neck. Dazai had been prepared for the sight of him in a suit or his ratty lounging clothes, he hadn't been prepared for this.

"What are you doing here?" asks Chuuya, his shocked expression shifting to a happier one, though he still looks slightly awestruck.

"What are you wearing?" asks Dazai before he can help himself, still looking Chuuya up and down.

Chuuya's flush feels like a fire under Dazai's skin. "I was going to meet up with Mich and his friends."

"Mich?" repeats Dazai, feeling all of his pleasant feelings disappear. He supposes he should have considered the possibility that Chuuya would be busy before he'd come over here. He'd just read the alert and decided it was the best excuse he was ever going to get to come see Chuuya and taken advantage of it before his brain could come up with any reasons not to.

"Michizou. Tachihara," clarifies Chuuya, looking at the ice cream he's holding, a huge grin taking over his face. "Is that from that shithole down by the beach?"

"I know chibi has refined tastes," says Dazai, trying to hide how awkward he feels. He offers the chocolate one to Chuuya more stiffly than he'd like to. "I didn't know you had plans."

"That's because you didn't ask," says Chuuya, rolling his eyes and coming to grab the ice cream cone. He hovers closer than is necessary after taking it. "What are you doing here?" The question is still slightly incredulous.

Dazai sighs and takes a large lick of his own cone. "It's obvious you haven't seen the announcement yet."

"What announcement?" asks Chuuya, licking his cone while frowning at Dazai in confusion.

"The Grammy nominations got released today," says Dazai, keeping his tone neutral.

Chuuya pauses with his cone tilted to take a bite, his eyes widening. “Double Black got a nomination?”

“A nomination?” repeats Dazai mockingly. “We got five. The album is up for Album of the Year, *Corruption* is up for Song of the Year and Record of the Year, and Double Black is up for Artist of the Year and Best Pop Duo.”

It takes Chuuya a moment to take the news in, he blinks a few times rapidly. Then his face breaks out in one of the widest smiles Dazai has ever seen on him. “No fucking way.” Chuuya closes the small space between them to wrap his arms around Dazai in a bone-crushing hug.

Dazai squeezes back, laughing as much as he can while Chuuya is suffocating him. “You’re getting ice cream in your hair.”

“Shut up,” says Chuuya, laughing too as he pulls away. His smile hasn’t dimmed at all (it’s quite possibly the most excruciatingly glorious sight Dazai has ever seen.)

“Five nominations, seriously?” asks Chuuya, practically bouncing in excitement.

“No, I’m lying,” says Dazai, rolling his eyes. “Don’t you ever check your phone?”

“I left it in the other room,” says Chuuya, smile shifting into a smirk. “Do you know what this means?”

“That Mori bribed the right people this year?” asks Dazai, smirking back.

Chuuya hits him with his hand that’s not holding his ice cream, though he’s forgotten about the cone based on how it’s dripping down his hand. “*It means* that we’re going to be performing together at the award show, asshole.”

Dazai actually hadn’t realized that. It takes him a moment to process it. Chuuya smiles and shakes his head at him, finally licking the ice cream off his hand.

“You mean I have to share the stage with you again?” asks Dazai, wrinkling his nose. “Gross.”

“Oh, it’s going to be awful,” agrees Chuuya, barely keeping the solemn tone he’s going for.

Dazai is cut off from answering by Chuuya’s phone ringing. Chuuya frowns down at it as he picks it up.

“Hello?” says Chuuya, pausing to listen to the other person. “Yeah, I heard. It’s crazy.”

Dazai walks away to take a closer look at the things in Chuuya’s living room. He picks up one of the French books and skims the back cover, trying to act as if he isn’t interested in Chuuya’s conversation. He puts down the book to pick through the albums Chuuya has out, they’re mostly rock. Dazai frowns a little at the selection, biting off a large chunk of his cone.

“No, I can’t come tonight anymore,” says Chuuya into the phone. He walks into the living room to sit down in the armchair, not bothered by Dazai messing with his stuff. “Because I’m fucking busy,” he says after the other person responds, tone slightly annoyed.

Chuuya loses patience after the next reply. “We can celebrate some other time. I’ve got to go. Talk to you tomorrow,” he says brusquely, hanging up before he gets an answer.

Dazai watches Chuuya change his phone to silent then toss it onto the coffee table. Chuuya continues to eat his cone nonchalantly.

“Thought you had plans?” asks Dazai, finishing his own cone and flopping onto the couch. It’s more comfortable than it has any right to be. He’d spent so many nights on this stupid couch.

“Plans changed,” says Chuuya lightly, getting to the end of his own cone. “Some bastard broke into my apartment, I’m stuck dealing with him.”

“Sounds terrible,” says Dazai, smirking at Chuuya.

“It’s the worst,” says Chuuya, smirking back.

It feels like barely any time has passed since they’d last done this. But ever since the announcement that The Black Lizards were leaving for tour in early February (an announcement that had not made Dazai feel like he was going to throw up) Dazai had gone from seeing Chuuya sporadically to not seeing Chuuya at all the past couple weeks.

It had bothered Dazai more than he’d expected. It certainly didn’t bode well for how Dazai was going to handle Chuuya being gone for *six months*. It’s why he’d jumped on this opportunity to see Chuuya despite the distance they’re supposed to be maintaining.

Dazai can’t bring himself to care as he settles into his couch, looking over at Chuuya. Chuuya’s looking back, propping up his head on one hand, still the trace of a smile on his face.

“I bought a new game the other day,” says Chuuya after a moment, offering the information casually.

“Oh?” asks Dazai, keeping his tone just as light. “What type of game am I beating chibi at? A racing game? A fighting game?”

“It’s a singing game,” says Chuuya, raising his eyebrows.

“They make those?” asks Dazai, not able to hold back a laugh.

“Get ready to get destroyed, mackerel,” declares Chuuya, getting out of his chair to set up the game.

“And you’re going to keep wearing that?” Dazai can’t help but ask.

“Will you shut the fuck up?” snaps Chuuya, throwing one of the microphones at him. Dazai barely catches it before it smacks him in the face. “I’m going to go change.”

“I just want my dog to be comfortable,” calls out Dazai to him as he walks towards the bedroom.

“I’ll strangle you,” he hears Chuuya yell from the other room.

Dazai snorts and goes to examine the wine sitting out on Chuuya’s counter. He’s never seen Chuuya care much about a beverage other than tea. The bottle looks slightly expensive though, and it’s already missing some of the wine.

Dazai pulls out the cork and takes a sniff, regretting it instantly as the sharp smell invades his nose. He almost drops the bottle but manages to set it down on the counter roughly.

“Stop fucking messing with my shit,” says Chuuya as he reenters the room and sees Dazai in the kitchen. He’s changed into much less distracting clothes, a black sweatshirt and jeans. “That’s expensive.”

“Chuuya is becoming so fancy,” says Dazai obnoxiously. He hates that there are so many things in here he hadn’t know Chuuya liked.

Chuuya takes the bottle and puts it away in one of the cupboards, flicking on his tea kettle. The familiar sight eases away some of the tension. “Out,” he commands, pointing towards the living room.

Dazai goes back to the couch, sighing dramatically. He flicks through a couple emails on his phone while he waits for Chuuya, already slightly behind after just a short away time from work. Any concern he has about it immediately goes away as Chuuya enters the room again with two mugs, one with tea and the other hot chocolate.

“Ready to get your ass kicked?” asks Chuuya, picking up the cheap plastic microphone and giving Dazai a smile, challenge clear in his expression.

“In your dreams, slug,” replies Dazai, picking up his own microphone, ridiculously excited to sing with Chuuya in any capacity, but just as eager to thrash Chuuya at the game.

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## **January, Almost One Year Since The Release of Corruption**

Dazai had attended a number of extravagant events with his parents back before he’d become too complicated to be taken to such places, but the Grammys make those look like child’s play. He’s never been somewhere so over the top, in both the clothes and the decorations.

Naturally, Dazai hates it. Thankfully Mori had allowed him to skip out on the press and commotion. Dazai had arrived late and slipped in through a private entrance, immediately being directed to a room set aside for Port Mafia Records.

There is only one thing worthwhile about this entire evening, and he’s in conversation with Hirotsu as Dazai walks in. Chuuya seems slightly irritated, which makes sense seeing as he’d

had to do the full press line up alone.

With The Black Lizard's debut album *Falling Camellia* coming out in less than a month, Chuuya has been thrust back into the spotlight promoting it. And since they're supposedly at odds, it looks better for Dazai not to appear with him.

Despite a tumultuous beginning, The Black Lizards had finished writing the album and were on track for finishing the final recordings and edits without any delays. Dazai thinks a lot of credit lies with Hirotsu, the old man is like a miracle worker.

Dazai doesn't approach Chuuya right away, opting to take a seat on the only couch that no one else is sitting on. He leans an elbow against the arm of it and rests his head on his hand, watching the room around him. Dazai is slightly on edge, both anticipating and dreading the upcoming performance.

Kouyou is here too, having just arrived and avoided the madness like Dazai had. She nods at him in acknowledgement while speaking to Takamura. Elise has taken up court by the refreshments, a small crowd of PMR artists surrounding her and keeping her happy.

He's forced out of his observations by something whacking him in the shin. Dazai rolls his eyes as he looks up at Chuuya, who's standing in front of him and crossing his arms.

"Missed you at sound check," says Chuuya, conveying his annoyance very clearly. He's wearing a suit, but it's a step up from his usual ones. The material is a rich black and it's fitted expertly.

*Missed you every second since September*, supplies Dazai's mind automatically. Dear god, he needs to get it fucking together. His emotions are all over the place right now.

"I got tied up," lies Dazai easily. "I figured you could check the sound well enough for both of us."

Chuuya scoffs. Dazai notices then that while they're both in black suits, they don't look like they're designed to make people think they're part of a duo. It brings a wry smile to his face, it's a subtle message that he can't help admire whoever came up with it.

"Well, if it isn't Port Mafia Records' gruesome twosome," says Kajii, coming up besides Chuuya. He smiles at the two of them with obvious contempt.

"Oh, the Lemon Fucker is here," says Chuuya, fake polite tone filled with derision. "I assume you conned your way in here under a general PMR invitation, as there's no chance a classless nobody like you would have been invited."

"Always so sensitive," says Kajii, leaning in close to get in Chuuya's face. "Now, now, Baby Red. We promised to play nice, remember?"

"Fuck off," says Chuuya coolly, not backing down at the proximity.

"Someone's got their diaper in a twist," says Kajii, cackling as he pulls away. He turns to smirk at Dazai. "I bet you're overjoyed you no longer have to deal with Chuu Chuu

anymore.”

“Do you ever get tired of flitting around like a puerile fool?” asks Dazai, lifting an eyebrow and making his tone as disinterested as possible. “Or is it natural after so much practice?”

“You certainly live up to your reputation, Mr. Demon Prodigy,” says Kajii, though some of his amusement has dimmed. He calls out to Chuuya as he walks away, “Break a leg out there, squirt.”

“Only if it’s yours,” replies Chuuya with an angry grin. It changes to a scowl as he turns to face Dazai.

“Charming,” says Dazai flatly.

Chuuya sighs and some of the tension leaves his body. He leans against the arm of the couch, his body angled towards Dazai.

“Demon Prodigy?” he asks, lips upturned slightly.

It’s a new nickname, and while Dazai has tried to ignore it, it’s catching on around PMR. He rolls his eyes. “Watch yourself, hat rack.”

Chuuya is about to answer when a man in a headset approaches them, looking slightly nervous. “Nakahara and Dazai? We’re ready to mic you.”

Chuuya smiles slightly and reaches out to jab Dazai in the chest with his fist. “Let’s go show these losers what real music sounds like.”

The nostalgia of the gesture makes Dazai want to obliterate something. But he settles for giving Chuuya’s hand a quick squeeze and using it to pull himself up, almost knocking Chuuya over in the process.

“Bastard,” declares Chuuya, but there’s a spark in his eyes that makes Dazai’s insides clench tightly.

The attendant chuckles nervously at them. “If you’ll follow me,” he says stiffly.

They walk behind him to a different area backstage, filled with familiar looking sound equipment. It’s hard to describe how it feels watching Chuuya adjust a microphone in his ear while twitching in anticipation. It’s a combination of having everything he’s longed for after months and being so dissatisfied at how brief it’s going to be. It hasn’t even started, and Dazai is already aching at how much he’ll crave it once it’s over.

He tries to shove that all away as they get the signal to go on. He and Chuuya walk on stage together, the Staples Center exploding in applause as they come into view. The room is full of some of the biggest singers and producers in the industry, but all Dazai can focus on is the piano as they approach it.

“Good evening, everyone,” says Chuuya brightly as he takes a seat in front of the instrument, still facing the audience. It’s like a switch flips whenever he gets on a stage, any nerves or

doubts always disappear. Chuuya slips into a presence and charisma that is impossible to resist.

“Chuuya and I are honored to have been nominated for so many awards this year, especially up against so many other great albums,” says Dazai cheerfully. The only one who can tell how insincere he’s being is Chuuya, who has to fight off a smile.

“We had no idea back when we were writing *Corruption* what was coming next,” says Chuuya, being honest as usual.

“Please tell me you’re not about to bore everyone to death with one of your sappy speeches,” whines Dazai. He barely notices the laughter of the crowd, too wrapped up in how natural this all feels.

“I guess it was too much to expect for you to not be annoying for a single evening,” says Chuuya, shaking his head. He twists to face the piano, flexing his fingers. “Fine, we’ll get to the action.”

A hush falls over the room even though Chuuya hasn’t played anything yet. That’s the power Chuuya has. Dazai feels his own heart beating faster in anticipation as he takes his place next to Chuuya, his throat a little dry.

It just had to be *Corruption* when they finally get a chance to play together again. Dazai has a lot of conflicting feelings about the song. Chuuya’s completely in his element when he plays it, and it’s something he’ll never get tired of hearing. But his own satisfaction during the song hasn’t ever been the same since Chuuya had mockingly asked him, *do you think playing Corruption is fun for me?*

It’s like a double-edged sword. He can’t deny the exhilaration he gets from the song, but he’d rather never play it if it meant he’d never have to see Chuuya’s quiet displays of terror in the middle of the night again.

Chuuya doesn’t hesitate at all before singing the opening lines, the notes as full of vulnerability and bitterness as ever.

*Oh grantors of dark disgrace*

*You need not wake me again*

The anticipation seems to hang in the air before Chuuya starts playing the piano, striking the keys with violent precision. He’s perfected the style since he’d played it for Dazai the first time, and the sound carries the mix of anger and sorrow of the song masterfully.

*Look at this, it’s my bone,*



*A tip of bone torn from its flesh, filthy, filled up with woes,*

*It's the days of our lives sticking out*

*Look at this, it's my heart,*

*A blackened thing, torn out and still beating*

*It's the thing humans can't live without*

Chuuya's voice builds as sings the opening verse, leaving any trace of gentleness behind. The notes are loud and precise, as brilliant as they are slightly haunting.

*You cannot escape gravity*

*It pulls us all down and apart*

*It rips away the gentlest souls*

*I fear I've been.....corrupted*

He drags out the last word, making it stand out with how wrong it sounds. Then he starts on the second verse, picking up the tempo and playing just a hint more frantically.

*Look at this, it's my blood*

*A crimson river, dark and churning*

*But I think it's supposed to stay on the inside*

*Look at this, it's my mind*

*A hollow place, a boundless prison*

*But its tainted nature can not be denied*

*You cannot escape gravity*

*It pulls us all down and apart*

*It rips away the gentlest souls*

*I know I've been.....corrupted*

Chuuya lengthens the last word again, letting it linger as he lets the sound of the piano completely fade away.

He lets the silence last for a moment then dives into the solo with reckless abandon. Despite how many times Dazai has heard it now, it never fails to make a shiver run down his spine. The music goes in all directions, never settling into a rhythm or flow. Dazai doesn't know anyone else who can play like this.

He lets it go on almost a little longer than he should, the strain of Chuuya's fingers clearly starting to reach their limit is visible when Dazai cuts off Chuuya with a single touch to his shoulder.

*"What does it mean to be human?"* Dazai sings, putting his all into the notes. Chuuya matches him effortlessly, settling into the lighter and softer notes of the bridge. *"I'll make you be human. You're no longer human, no longer human. Wake up."*

They sing their next lines back and forth, not breaking eye contact once.

*You cannot escape gravity (what does it mean to be human)*

*It pulls us down (I'll make you be human) and apart*

*It rips away the gentlest souls (You're no longer human, no longer human)*

*I think it's time to.....wake up*

Their voices blend together on the last line, the only notes they sing together in the whole song, a flawless combination.

Chuuya finally looks away to sing the closing to the song, shifting to a softer and cleaner style.

*Oh grantors of dark disgrace*

*I fear I've woken again*

The stadium bursts out into applause as he finishes, but Dazai kind of feels like screaming at the top of his lungs. He has to work to fight down the feeling, but he catches the matching uneasiness in Chuuya's eyes before he buries it and thanks the room with a smile.

Later on, he's still on edge but mostly bored out of his mind as he pretends to watch the ceremony. Of course after their duet he and Chuuya had been separated, it wouldn't look good for the feuding Double Black to spend time together.

He doesn't even care that they've won all the awards they were up for so far. What does a stupid little trophy matter if he can't even sit next to the only person he wants to?

Dazai is debating spending the rest of the show subtly typing up notes on Akutagawa's vocal training when he catches a flash of red out of the corner of his eye. It's Chuuya, and he tilts his head to the side, beckoning Dazai to meet him in one of the side halls.

Dazai raises a brow, and Chuuya rolls his eyes and tilts his head more adamantly.

It makes Dazai snort under his breath. But he acts casual as he gets up from his seat and meets Chuuya in the hall, the area clear of other people.

"You want to get out of here?" asks Chuuya. He leans against the wall and eyes Dazai with a slight smirk.

It's not a matter of what Dazai wants (as it pretty much never is.) "It's the middle of the show, slug," he replies, not hiding how he's more than a little annoyed at the unfeasible offer. "We'd be in an astronomical amount of shit if we left now. And you know why we aren't allowed to be seen leaving together."

"We just won five Grammys," says Chuuya, waving a hand dismissively. "We deserve a break."

Dazai raises his eyebrows, his surprise outweighing his anger. "They've only announced two."

"I know a guy," says Chuuya flippantly. "Plus, aren't you supposed to be the marketing genius? Can't you spin some story about how we got into a blowout fight and left early?"

It... It is something Dazai could pull off. In fact, it'd probably hype up their feud in a really advantageous way. "That still doesn't change that we can't leave at the same time."

"You're assuming that someone is going to see us," says Chuuya, pulling out a set of keys and wiggling them triumphantly. "I have my bike."

Dazai has sworn up and down that he would never get onto Chuuya's pink monstrosity. But the payoff had never been this high before.

Dazai rolls his eyes and starts for the parking lot without waiting for Chuuya, saying over his shoulder, "Are you coming or what? Move those tiny legs of yours."

Chuuya just laughs, catching up to Dazai easily and elbowing him in the ribs. He leads the way to the private parking lot reserved for the guests, almost completely empty during the middle of the program.

"Where are we going?" asks Dazai, frowning as he puts on the helmet Chuuya hands him and climbing on the back of the motorcycle behind Chuuya. He'd been mostly messing with Chuuya by declaring how he'd never ride it, but he genuinely is a bit frightened of the thing.

"You'll see," says Chuuya, snapping on his own helmet with ease and starting the bike. The engine rumbles beneath them. Dazai doesn't even get to appreciate having his arms wrapped around Chuuya as he pulls out of the parking lot, doing it more out of need than desire.

Chuuya drives them away from the crowded streets, taking a back alley and heading back towards PMR. Dazai wants to repeat his question of where they're going, but he's not going to risk letting go or distracting Chuuya.

There isn't much traffic as they get further away, the night slightly calm as they get closer to their destination. Honestly, Dazai should have known better.

Chuuya parks his bike in a lot next to an empty stretch of beach. Dazai forces himself to let go of Chuuya and act like he hadn't been terrified. Based on Chuuya's laughter he doesn't pull it off.

Chuuya clips both their helmets to the bike and leads the way down to the beach. He takes off his expensive suit jacket and throws it down in the sand, using it as a blanket and sitting down. Dazai keeps his own coat on (he'd never run as warm as Chuuya), but he does sit down next to him.

The moon is bright tonight, and the view of the ocean is clear. Dazai still doesn't understand Chuuya's dedication to it, but he's content enough to be somewhere that makes Chuuya feel more settled. He'd needed settling himself after the turmoil of playing *Corruption* together.

It's still weighing on him. He can't shake the negative thoughts and unavoidable worry. He glances over at Chuuya, wondering if he'll see any trace of the aftereffects of the song he loathes.

"Ugh, it's too quiet," says Chuuya, clearly not troubled at all. "How can you stand to sit in silence like this?"

Dazai snorts slightly. He knows Chuuya better than anyone else, yet he can never manage to pin him down. "It's called relaxing."

“It’s more relaxing if there’s music,” argues Chuuya, laying down and rolling up his sleeves. He runs his right hand up and down in the sand.

“Sing something for us then,” suggests Dazai, bringing his knees up and leaning his head on them, turning to the side to face Chuuya. He wrinkles his nose a little at all the sand, it’s always extremely annoying when it gets caught in his bandages.

“Like what?” asks Chuuya, kicking off his shoes and socks and burying his feet in the sand too. He’s more relaxed than Dazai has seen him in ages, and it makes Dazai feel like a weight has been lifted off his chest.

“Anything,” says Dazai, tone light. He means it more than Chuuya knows. He could sing anything, and it would be exactly what Dazai wanted to hear, as long as it’s Chuuya singing it.

He isn’t prepared for the song that Chuuya starts singing though, the words soft and earnest, a slow and deliberate tempo.

*Oh, songs of sky and ocean*

*I think I know the very essence of beauty*

*These waves a chorus upon the shore*

*Oh, songs of sky and ocean*

*This hidden ballad that always plays*

*A rhythm once found that you cannot ignore*

“That’s new,” comments Dazai slowly. It’s clearly something Chuuya wrote himself, the style agonizingly familiar. He hadn’t been aware Chuuya had been writing anything that wasn’t for the band he’d seemed so focused on.

“Just something I’ve been playing around with in my head,” says Chuuya, shrugging a little.

Dazai takes off his coat and uses it as a pillow, laying down in the sand next to Chuuya. What was the discomfort of a little sand compared to getting to be next to Chuuya anyway? “We just won a Grammy. Don’t you ever take a break?”

“Grammys,” corrects Chuuya smugly. Then he shifts to a more serious expression, one Dazai hasn’t seen in quite some time. “I mean, I like playing with The Black Lizards. It’s fun. But the music isn’t really mine.” He turns his horrendously blue eyes on Dazai. “Don’t you ever think about it?”

“Think about what?” asks Dazai, looking back and trying not to clench his fists at his sides.

“Our next album.” Chuuya says that words as if they aren’t a bomb he’s setting off carelessly.

Dazai thinks about it every single day. It’s why he works as hard as he does. “Of course,” he says cheerfully. “I really think we should revisit Slug and Mackerel’s Doo-Wops as a possible title.”

“I’m being serious.” Chuuya gives him a flat stare.

Dazai had forgotten what it’s like to be under Chuuya’s scrutiny. Chuuya demands honesty, and gives it himself so willingly (it’s one of the things Dazai admires most about him, one of the ways he knows they’re complete opposites.)

“Of course,” says Dazai again, dropping all of the joking this time. Then adds (because if he’s already bleeding, why not go for the kill?), “But I don’t like to do it alone. So I’d rather wait until we can think about it together.”

“Might be waiting a while,” says Chuuya bitterly, kicking the sand with one of his feet in obvious frustration.

“Worth it,” says Dazai, no hesitation. Chuuya’s eyes soften at the rare offering of sincerity.

He shifts over so he’s lying with his head on Dazai’s stomach, grabbing one of Dazai’s hands and intertwining their fingers easily. Dazai doesn’t even care that Chuuya’s hand is covered in sand.

“I don’t want to go home,” says Chuuya lowly. “I don’t want to ruin tonight with a fucking nightmare.”

“So let’s just stay here,” suggests Dazai, lowering his voice too, running his thumb over Chuuya’s hand in his grip gently. “When’s the last time we pulled an all-nighter?”

It pulls a slight laugh out of Chuuya, which was its intended purpose. “When we were writing *Shame and Toad* and couldn’t stop arguing about the second verse.”

“Ah, yes,” says Dazai, smiling to himself. “You almost threw the white board at me.”

“You deserved it,” declares Chuuya, but there’s no anger behind it.

It’s quiet for a moment, and Dazai considers how to give Chuuya what he needs. He gets so few opportunities to help Chuuya these days, he has to make this one count.

“Tell me about Falling Camellia,” says Dazai, raising his head slightly so he gets a better look at Chuuya.

“Like you don’t already know everything about it,” says Chuuya, rolling his eyes.

“Of course,” agrees Dazai easily. “But I haven’t heard what *you* think of it. Walk me through it, spare no details.”

Chuuya twists his head so he can meet Dazai's eyes. Then he lays back down and begins speaking. "So the first song is *Lemon Bomb*, which is actually probably the best song, not that I would ever admit it to Kajii. It has more of a wild energy than the other songs."

Dazai listens as he continues on, trying to get comfortable in the sand. He doesn't let go of Chuuya's hand until the sky turns pink.

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## **February, One Year & One Week Since the Release Of Corruption**

Chuuya doesn't know what the fuck Mori had been thinking when he came up with this idea. If his goal had been for either Chuuya or Kajii to kill the other before tour started, he might get his wish. They're currently stuck at a beach house slightly south of L.A, alone for the weekend to give them a chance to "resolve their issues." The house belongs to PMR and is just as lavish as Chuuya had thought it would be (house seems like it might be the wrong word, mansion might be more accurate.)

If the order had come from Hirotsu, Chuuya would have had no problem ignoring it. But since it had come from Mori himself, Chuuya had been forced to comply. And Kajii is insufferable, but he seems to have a large amount of respect for Mori, referring to him as the admiral of the universe.

They'd both taken the car to the house together after they'd finished rehearsal. The Black Lizards are miraculously pretty much tour ready, with only a couple kinks here and there. They're set to play their first show early next week. Chuuya had been planning to spend the weekend preparing for tour and weaseling his way into seeing Dazai if he could pull it off. He certainly hadn't wanted to spend it with the Lemon Fucker.

Chuuya had gone in with a plan to ignore Kajii and just get through the weekend, but that plan had gone out the window when Kajii had started trying to piss him off right from the get go. The ensuing shouting match has only been escalating. They're currently in the house's huge kitchen, standing on opposite sides of the island while they argue.

"What is your problem?" demands Chuuya, trying not to yell (and kind of failing). "Are you incapable of being a decent fucking person? Neither of us clearly wanted to be here this weekend, but I don't get why you have to try to make it even worse."

"Sorry to have ruined all your special plans," says Kajii mockingly.

"I don't care if you fucking like me," says Chuuya, throwing his hands in the air in frustration. "But we're going to have to fucking work together. Get over it."

"Chuuya Nakahara just can't stand someone else not bowing down before him and tripping all over themselves to please him," says Kajii, leaning forward with both hands against the island.

"You're the one who's full of themselves," fires back Chuuya. "You can't stand that I didn't think your songs were perfect and had good ideas for how to make them better."

“Good ideas?” Kajii laughs condescendingly. “All you came up with is a bunch of sentimental nonsense that Hirotsu allowed because he dotes on you.”

Chuuya rolls his eyes. He doesn’t have any doubts about his songwriting abilities. He’d been able to keep up with the best songwriter he knows, so Kajii’s taunts are just annoying.

“Whatever. All of the writing is over now anyway. It doesn’t even fucking matter anymore. So can’t we just focus on getting through this tour?”

“You should be *grateful* I let a runt like you in my band,” says Kajii, obviously not interested in peace. “I saved you from having to play with that pretentious dickhead you were stuck with.”

Chuuya can tolerate a lot, especially when it’s directed at himself. Kajii could sling whatever he wanted at him, call him anything. But Chuuya will *not* fucking stand for him saying anything about Dazai.

So Chuuya does what he’s been dying to for months and stalks across the room and socks Kajii in the face.

Chuuya’s not exactly proud of how many fights he’d been in when he was younger, but he knows how to doll out a punch. His fist makes a satisfying smack against Kajii’s cheek, the other boy flying back into the counter behind him and crying out.

Kajii holds up a hand to his face, staring at Chuuya in clear disbelief. “You *hit me*.”

“And I’ll do it again if you don’t watch your mouth,” threatens Chuuya, trying to hide how much pain his right hand is in.

“You hit me,” repeats Kajii, still in shock, not moving from his spot leaning against the counter.

“What is your fucking problem with me?” asks Chuuya, crossing his arms (slightly delicately because of his throbbing hand). He stops yelling and keeps his tone as cold and level as he can. “And don’t say it’s because I’m too fucking soft. Drop the bullshit and give me a real answer.”

“You’re an entitled prick,” declares Kajii, no longer shouting either, but sounding more genuinely angry instead of mocking for once. “I worked on these songs for *years* before you waltzed onto this project like you owned it. Not to mention you have zero fucking experience in writing or playing rock music, but because you’re our little shining star, we all have to kiss your fucking ass.”

“I didn’t ask to be put in this band,” says Chuuya, barely holding his temper in check. “I was assigned to it. I’m not trying to steal your fucking spotlight or whatever. I’d just rather play music that was the best it could be, but if you’re too much of a fucking narcissistic freak to accept any help, we’ll just play shit. Should be a fun tour.”

“You swear a lot,” says Kajii, rubbing his face with one hand. “And you’ve got a hell of a right hook.”



Chuuya sighs and opens up the freezer, grabbing a bag of frozen corn and throwing it at Kajii. He grabs another one for himself to ice his hand. He's not in the mood to pretend it's fine to try and save face anymore. He's sick of walking in circles and all the useless fighting.

"I was assigned to be in this band, but I don't hate it," says Chuuya, ditching any bravado for honesty now. "The music *is* good. And it's fun. It's kind of a nice change of pace not to be playing melancholic shit all the time. So if you could stop trying to make it miserable for me, I might actually enjoy it."

"Some of your ideas were too sappy for rock," says Kajii, slightly muffled around his ice pack. "But not all of them totally sucked." The acknowledgment is clearly difficult for him.

"I know," says Chuuya simply. He jumps up to sit on top of the island, readjusting his own ice.

"I'm not here to stroke your ego, Baby Red," says Kajii, pointing his index finger with his free hand. Chuuya wonders if he's going to have a black eye. He figures they can always cover it up with makeup if they have to.

"I wouldn't want you to, Lemon Fucker," replies Chuuya, smirking slightly and shaking his head.

Kajii snorts a little. "I actually think it's hilarious that you call me that."

"I hate it when you call me Baby Red," admits Chuuya.

"I know," says Kajii smugly.

It doesn't piss off Chuuya as much as it used to. He just rolls his eyes.

It's quiet for a minute, both of them silently icing their injuries. Chuuya can just barely hear the sound of the ocean outside, the light from the sunset coming in through the huge windows around them.

"So now what are we supposed to do for the rest of the weekend?" asks Chuuya, pulling up his legs to sit cross-legged on the island. "We're still stuck here the next couple days. Mori isn't going to let us leave early."

Kajii looks around the room, contemplating. Then he smirks and asks, "Want to get drunk?"

Chuuya considers the idea, a smile forming on his face. "Do you think they have any wine?"

Chuuya is torn between finishing up the little packing he has left to do when he gets home or going straight to bed and saving it for the morning. He knows he'll regret having to scramble to get everything done, but he's tired enough that it seems appealing.

He's walking the few blocks from the bar where he'd left Tachihara and his friends behind to his dorm, enjoying the quiet walk alone. Originally they had just made plans to get dinner, a final celebration before they left for tour the next day. But they'd ended up going for a few drinks after.

Chuuya had allowed himself to be dragged along. It'd been better than staring at his phone the whole night, waiting for Dazai to fucking text him back after Chuuya had messaged him earlier. But apparently he doesn't give a shit that he's leaving tomorrow for six months based on how he can't be bothered to answer.

He'd eventually run out of steam when the others had started debating moving to a different bar. Chuuya had warned Mich that he was going to regret being hungover tomorrow, but Tachihara had waved him off. Chuuya had let him, it was his funeral.

Falling Camellia is out now, and it's been selling extremely well in its first couple days. Or at least that's what everyone is telling him. The numbers seem small compared to Double Black, and especially compared to *Corruption*. But everyone keeps assuring him that it's doing remarkably for its genre.

Now that he's made some semblance of peace with Kajii, he's not as apprehensive about tour as he had been. He still has a little twist of anxiety in his gut at the idea though. It's only gotten worse throughout the day as he'd slowly given up on getting the chance to see Dazai one last time. Chuuya can't decide if he's more pissed off or disappointed. He gets that Dazai is busy and they still aren't supposed to be seen palling around, but he'd thought this was important enough to make an exception.

Chuuya shoves his keys into the door at the end of the third floor hallway, settling on making some tea and going to sleep. He's going to be deprived of good tea for the foreseeable future, plus there's no way he's going to be later than Tachihara tomorrow.

He shuts the door behind him, locking it and tossing his keys onto the small table he keeps next to the door. He goes to flick on the lights when he realizes they're already on. Chuuya looks up to meet dark eyes, their owner lounging on his couch with a laptop in front of him.

"There you are," says Dazai, setting his laptop down on the coffee table and sitting up. "You're out rather late for someone leaving for tour tomorrow."

Chuuya hovers between being insanely relieved and angry. "You couldn't have texted me back?"

"I was in the middle of something," says Dazai, and he looks frustrated enough about it that Chuuya lets go of a little bit of anger. "Actually several somethings. I came straight here when I was finished. I've only been here for maybe half an hour."

“If you had let me know you were coming, I would have been here,” points out Chuuya, still not entirely over his irritation.

“Did you really think I wouldn’t come see you before you left?” asks Dazai. The slight hint of uneasiness in the question makes Chuuya let go of his remaining ill will.

“Not because you didn’t want to,” clarifies Chuuya, coming into the living room and sinking into the armchair. “But I was starting to think it might not work out.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” says Dazai, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees.

Chuuya looks over at him, noting the exhaustion in his eyes. They haven’t had much time to talk since the night of the Grammys, that one incredible experience that had almost made everything slightly worse when they’d had to go back to the current state the next day.

Chuuya had tried not to spend too much time thinking about the feeling he’d gotten talking for hours with Dazai about music, the sounds of the ocean all around them, the feel of fingers and bandages against his hand. He could torture himself with how much he’d wanted it to be something he could have regularly.

“You like tired,” says Chuuya, because it needs saying. He knows Dazai has always been a borderline insomniac, but he’s worried about him. There’s not going to be anybody to bully him into taking care of himself after he leaves. He might be able to talk Kouyou into a little of it, she seems to have less of a problem with Dazai these days. Apparently being executives together has cleared the air between them.

“I’ve been busy,” says Dazai, shrugging a bit. Chuuya can tell he’s both bothered and a little touched by the concern.

“You should stay here tonight,” says Chuuya before thinking it through.

The offer hangs between them heavily. Dazai hasn’t stayed here once since they got back from tour. He’d come over the one night they’d gotten the Grammy nominations, but he’d left to go back to his apartment before it got too late, saying he had to be at PMR early the next morning. The only other times he’d been here since had been to raid his fridge when Chuuya wasn’t home (which Chuuya had made him do).

Chuuya’s throat is uncomfortably dry. He’s never asked Dazai to stay with him without the threat of a nightmare or the old excuse of writing an album. Chuuya has tried to keep an iron grip on his feelings for Dazai since Double Black had been separated. But this request feels like he might have just undid all of those efforts. He’s about to take it back when Dazai answers.

“Okay,” says Dazai thickly, eyes meeting his with a rare display of unconcealed emotion, Dazai’s contentment and gratitude visible without any kind of shield or mask.

Chuuya’s stomach dips and his answering smile is a little shaky. “Okay,” he says, the word coming out slightly unsteadily.

“Get us some blankets,” says Dazai, voice completely back to normal, standing up and moving into the kitchen. “I’ll make you one of your soothing grass drinks.” He turns to give Chuuya a smile over his shoulder.

Chuuya hadn’t even known how he was going to navigate whether Dazai was sleeping on the couch alone or they’d sleep in the same room, but Dazai had settled that easily. Sometimes it’s uncanny how well Dazai can read him. He remembers being fifteen and hating it, and now he feels the exact opposite about it.

“If you do anything to fuck with my teakettle I’ll break your face,” says Chuuya in response. He shoots Dazai an answering smile as he shifts his coffee table to the side of the room.

He goes to his bedroom to change and grab his comforter and pillows. He throws them on the floor in the living room, stacking all the blankets he has so the ground is hopefully somewhat comfortable.

Dazai hands him a mug once he’s finished. Chuuya takes it and carefully sits down on the pile he’s created without spilling any of the tea. He takes a cautious sip, but Dazai hadn’t made it too hot to drink.

Dazai strips off his suit jacket and tie, loosening his shirt so it’s less tight to sleep in. Chuuya would offer him clothes, but he knows they’d all be way too small for him (and he doesn’t want to give Dazai the ammunition of that fact.)

Chuuya drinks his tea and eyes the bandages around Dazai’s neck and arms as he tosses his jacket onto the couch, wondering not for the first time why he feels the need to cover up so much of his skin. But he respects Dazai’s privacy way too much to ever pry, and he’d never wanted to ambush Dazai with the question when they get so little time together. He would hate himself if he ruined any of it.

Dazai goes to turn the lights off then lies down beside him on his stomach, propping his elbows on one of the pillows and facing Chuuya, just visible in the glow of the city’s lights streaming through his living room windows. “I heard a rumor you and Kajii are getting along now.”

“That’s more than a slight exaggeration,” says Chuuya, snorting a little. “We just worked out some of our shit and agreed not to antagonize each other on purpose anymore. I still think he’s obnoxious.”

“I also heard a rumor that you punched him in the face,” says Dazai, raising an eyebrow.

“He had it coming,” mutters Chuuya, taking another large sip of his tea.

Dazai laughs, smiling up at him. “Oh, chibi. You’re still a little street punk at heart aren’t you?”

Chuuya nudges him roughly with one of his feet, but Dazai just laughs even harder. Chuuya has to hide his answering smile behind his tea.

He finishes off the last of the tea, reaching over and setting the mug down on the floor. Chuuya sets his phone alarm for early the next morning, putting it down next to the used mug.

Dazai moves too so that they can get under the first couple layers of blankets. Chuuya is just starting to wonder how they're going to do this when Dazai scoots over and wraps both his arms around Chuuya without any uncertainty. Chuuya's breath catches slightly as Dazai pulls him in close and buries his head against Chuuya's shoulder.

The warmth that spreads throughout his whole body has nothing to do with the blankets. Chuuya frees his own arm from underneath Dazai to move it so it's more comfortable, settling it against Dazai's back.

It's quiet in the room. He can only hear the sound of their breathing and the muffled noises of L.A. in the background. Chuuya is going to miss this stupid city so much it's unbearable, but that doesn't even compare to how much he's going to miss the person slightly crushing his shoulder. He can't resist speaking up.

"I love playing music, especially live," says Chuuya, volume somewhere between normal and a whisper. Dazai shifts, propping his head against Chuuya so they can look at each other. "It's my favorite thing in the world. It doesn't make sense that I'm dreading it."

"I'll watch the ocean for you," says Dazai lightly, as if he were offering to water his plants while he was gone. But his eyes hold something much deeper. "It'll be waiting for you when you get back."

"Meanwhile, who's going to be watching my dog?" asks Dazai, shifting to a whining tone. "Who's going to take it on walks? Make sure it's getting enough water? I feel like such an irresponsible pet owner."

"You're the one who would skip all your meals if I wasn't around," says Chuuya, trying to push Dazai away but he just clings on even tighter. Dazai settles back against Chuuya's shoulder, hiding his face slightly.

"I don't want you to go," says Dazai so quietly Chuuya isn't sure he heard him at first.

"Dogs are loyal," whispers Chuuya, stroking his hand lightly up and down Dazai's back. "You can leave them for years and they still don't forget their owners, still wait for them endlessly."

Dazai starts laughing, hard, and Chuuya can feel it with how tightly they're pressed against each other. "I can't believe you finally admitted you're my dog," he says in between laughing.

"You are the literal worst," says Chuuya, face heating up in embarrassment. The way Dazai relaxes against him makes it so he can't regret it though.

"Stop barking, Chuuya," says Dazai giddily. "You've got a big day tomorrow." The way he snuggles into Chuuya and gently holds him keeps Chuuya from reacting to the teasing.

“You’re the one who won’t shut up,” murmurs Chuuya, closing his eyes. Despite being on the floor, he can’t recall the last time he felt this comfortable as he drifts off to sleep.

His back is not as pleased with his sleeping choices as his mind had been the next morning. It hurts a little when his alarm goes off, blaring unpleasantly. Chuuya reaches over to shut it off clumsily, finally finding the phone after some feeling around.

The room is brighter than his bedroom usually is, and Chuuya squints as he looks over to the other side of the blankets to see he’s alone. He isn’t able to get too upset before he becomes aware of the sound of someone quietly tying.

Chuuya sits up fully to see Dazai working on his computer in the kitchen, hunched over the stool at the counter, earphones on. He’s shirt is still loose from sleeping, and he’s got a cup of coffee next to him.

It brings a smile to Chuuya’s face, the sight intimately familiar. How many mornings on tour had he woken up to the same thing? (He wouldn’t necessarily hate always waking up like this.) He’s distracted from going over to talk to him though when he remembers he still has to finish packing.

Chuuya swears under his breath as he rushes to get up. Dazai looks up from his work, raising his eyebrows at how he starts moving around the dorm frantically, throwing things into his suitcase and backpack.

“Shut up,” says Chuuya as a good morning. Dazai just smiles slightly, shaking his head and going back to his work.

He finally gets everything together right before when he has to leave in order to not be late. He shoves the rest of his stuff into place and zips everything up, tossing the full luggage near his door.

Chuuya turns to face Dazai once he’s done, it suddenly hitting him all at once how long it’s going to be before they see each other again. These last few months had been terrible, but even when he hadn’t seen Dazai he’d always been there in some way. He doesn’t know what to say. Goodbye feels too cheap to express everything he’s feeling.

Dazai gets off the stool, noticing Chuuya’s impending departure. Chuuya walks over so he’s standing next to the counter too.

“Here,” says Dazai, handing him a travel mug full of tea that Chuuya doesn’t remember owning. “Take this for the road.”

“Thanks,” says Chuuya softly, absurdly put off by the tiny gesture for some reason.

“Have a good tour, slug,” says Dazai. His smiles are rarely genuine, but this one is even faker than usual.

“Don’t burn down the city, mackerel,” says Chuuya, forcing a fake smile himself.

“Please,” says Dazai, rolling his eyes. “Like I’d do that without you to be my lookout.”

Fuck it, Chuuya set the travel mug down harshly on the counter, moving forward and hugging Dazai as tightly as he can, having to tiptoe slightly to reach. Dazai's arms come up to return the embrace quickly, practically crushing Chuuya with their force. Neither of them let go for a long moment.

But Chuuya really can't afford to be late, no matter how much Hirotsu likes him. He reluctantly pulls back. Dazai squeezes him tighter for a second then releases him as well.

Chuuya doesn't let him get far though, cupping his face in his hands and pulling him forward so that they're eye to eye. "Fucking answer me when I text you," he commands, though it comes out kind of desperate.

"I will," promises Dazai hoarsely. Chuuya can see him swallow harshly.

It takes a tremendous amount of effort to let go. Chuuya sighs to himself as he does, grabbing the stupidly thoughtful travel mug off the counter angrily. He storms over to his door, picking up his bags just as roughly.

He opens the door and looks back a final time. Dazai is watching him, his expression hard to witness.

"See you in August," declares Chuuya forcefully. "Lock up when you leave."

He slams the door shut before Dazai has a chance to answer, making himself walk towards where the tour bus is waiting. He has to work unbelievably hard to get his shit together again before he approaches his bandmates.

The sight of Tachihara looking kind of pale and almost as miserable as he is helps a lot.

"Baby Red!" calls out Kajii as he gets closer. He waves with both hands enthusiastically.

Chuuya gives him the finger and goes to hand his luggage off to the stage hands. He comes back over when he's done, sipping his tea from his mug.

"Where's Gin?" asks Chuuya, looking around for the quietest member of the band.

"She's running late," says Hirotsu, appearing in the door of the bus. "You're all running late." He sounds very displeased.

"She's on her way," says Tachihara, the words a slight croak. Hirotsu gives him a very disappointed look.

"Lightweight," says Kajii, slapping Tachihara on the back. Tachihara lets out a slight groan.

"There any water on the bus?" asks Chuuya, taking pity on his friend.

Hirotsu sighs but gets back on the bus to look for some. Tachihara gives Chuuya a grateful smile.

“What the fuck,” says Kajii, looking off to the side. Chuuya follows his gaze, jaw dropping at the sight a little.

Gin has arrived, carrying six suitcases worth of luggage. She’s making her brother carry four of them, and he looks extremely put out about it.

“Why does she have so much stuff?” asks Tachihara, frowning at the approaching siblings. “She wears like two different black outfits.”

Gin clearly hears him, narrowing her eyes at him. “You should be more worried about yourself. You look like death warmed over.”

Tachihara is cut off from replying by Hirotsu reappearing and shoving a bottle of water at him. He thanks the older man and starts guzzling from it. Gin walks over to help her brother with her stuff. Chuuya watches Gin give Ryuunosuke a hug, snorting a little at the usually sour boy awkwardly hugging his sister back.

“Now that we’re all here, you can all get on the bus,” says Hirotsu shortly. He gestures to the door impatiently.

Kajii smirks and leads the way, shoving Tachihara a little as he goes. Tachihara clutches his water a little tighter and follows him, looking a little anxious about riding the bumpy vehicle.

Chuuya can’t help but smile as he climbs on behind them, this tour certainty has no risk of being boring. Hirotsu returns the smile tiredly as he passes him.

Chuuya takes a seat on the bus across from Tachihara while Kajii explores the interior. Chuuya’s seen enough of the inside of tour buses to not be that interested. Gin gets on after a minute, sitting on the same side as Tachihara but as far away from him as possible. She gives him a disgusted look as he burps.

“Let The Black Lizard’s Falling Camellia tour begin,” yells Kajii as the bus pulls away from the Port Mafia Records’ parking lot.

Chuuya stretches out his legs on the seat, trying to get comfortable. He takes another drink of his tea, trying to stop from feeling so wretched in front of the others.

His phone buzzes and he pulls it out, starting to smile despite himself at the message.

**[7:04am Mackerel]: First of all, it’s rude to leave in the middle of a conversation. Where are your manners, chibi? I suppose I shouldn’t expect any better from a dog. I pity your bandmates for being stuck with someone so tiny and unpleasant.**

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## **March, One Year, One and a Half Months Since the Release of Corruption**

L.A. is the worst city in the world, and Dazai has no idea why he lives here. It’s loud, the traffic is unbearable, and almost everyone who lives here is a mindless fool.



Dazai has thrown himself into work over the past few weeks, his productivity rising sharply. Instead of pleasing him, it just makes his failures stand out more.

Despite how much time he spends working with Akutagawa, he never seems to improve. It's like he's hit some sort of obstacle, and Dazai keeps ramming him against to try and break through it. But no matter what he tries, the other boy's vocals aren't getting any better.

Dazai in general isn't easily angered, but he can't help how impatient he's getting. The sooner Akutagawa can get over himself, the sooner he can release music, and the sooner Dazai can go back to being part of a duo.

There haven't been words created to describe how excruciating it's been now that Chuuya's left. Dazai only allows himself to sulk when he's absolutely sure he's alone. For those few moments at night in his apartment, he lets himself think about how much he pathetically wishes he were there.

Dazai's not sure if the night he spent with Chuuya before he left had helped or made things even worse. Not that Dazai regrets it, he could never regret a single moment of it. He just wants to know when these encounters are going to stop being so short and insufficient.

Despite how busy he is, he makes sure he finds the time to text Chuuya back without too many delays. The way he'd asked him to is seared into his memory. It's not convenient to check his phone so often, but Dazai makes it work.

Chuuya is almost just as busy, but The Black Lizards tour is less jam-packed with events than the Double Black one had been. The album is selling well, beyond the projected estimates even. It isn't anything record-breaking though. Dazai suspects that many of the sales are due to Chuuya's popularity rather than the quality of the music.

Chuuya and Dazai had skirted around the issue of whether Dazai thought the music was good whenever it was brought up. Dazai gets the feeling that Chuuya knows he's not all that impressed with it. Dazai also gets the feeling that Chuuya on some level shares that feeling. Chuuya is less opinionated than Dazai about music, but he tends to be more attracted to complex and what he calls "impactful" music. The Black Lizards' music does not fall into that category.

Right now Dazai is in the middle of trying to track down a misplaced shipment of newly designed calendars featuring a different Port Mafia Records' artist each month. Normally this would be grunt work and Dazai would pass it off to somebody beneath him. But it's the fifth day since he'd requested someone take care of it, and nothing has been done. So Dazai is taking the problem into his own hands, heading towards a part of the building he usually doesn't spend much time in.

Dazai's phone goes off as he take the elevator to where the shipping department is housed. He pulls it out to check it, slightly disappointed it's not someone who found his lost shipment while also pleased who it is from.

**[10:04am Slug]: if it's a shipping issue why don't you just make ace deal with it**

He quickly types out a reply, getting off the elevator on his floor.

**[10:05am Dazai]: You know Ace is the least useful person to go to with actual work.**

He's still holding onto the phone when Chuuya replies.

**[10:05am Slug]: or you're just being impatient**

Dazai hits the call button, figuring if Chuuya is busy he can just ignore it. But he answers after the second ring.

"Hello?" Even across the phone his voice does dangerous things to Dazai's insides.

"I'm not being impatient," says Dazai, making his way down the hall. "It's been five days. How hard can it be to find a box of calendars?"

"People do have other work to do," says Chuuya, sounding amused. "I doubt your missing calendars are a priority."

"They should be," says Dazai flatly, not whining like he would if they were alone. "When an executive asks for something, it should get done."

"Oh, is Mr. Big Bad Demon Prodigy sad nobody is following his orders?" asks Chuuya mockingly.

Dazai has to fight to cover a snort. "You'd understand if you were an executive."

Chuuya scoffs. "I like playing music. I'd rather die than be stuck in a stuffy office."

Dazai is approaching the front desk of the shipping department, so he cheerfully tells Chuuya, "Hold please."

"Do you honestly expect me to stay on the line while you fucking-" is all Dazai hears him say before he pulls the phone away, letting it hang by his side.

"Hello there," says Dazai to the women working the front desk. It's obvious she knows who he is by the way she's staring at him with slightly wide eyes. "I'm afraid a shipment of mine has gone missing. Could you direct me to someone who can help me find it?"

"Um, let me check," says the women, turning to her computer and typing quickly.

Dazai doesn't hide his displeasure, leaning against the desk impatiently. "Is it really that hard to track down a simple package?"

"I'll go get someone right away, sir." The woman stands up, clearly nervous as she walks away from her desk briskly and going further into the office.

Dazai sighs and bring the phone back up to his ear. "Ace really hires the worst people."

“Maybe if you weren’t such a dick to people they’d be more likely to help you,” says Chuuya. Dazai can’t tell if he’s annoyed by Dazai being rude to the secretary or because Dazai put him on hold. Annoying Chuuya in person is just infinitely better.

“How’s the tour?” asks Dazai, rearranging the knick knacks on the secretary’s desk. “Where are you guys now?”

He’s distracted from Chuuya’s reply by the appearance of a tall man. The man stops when he sees Dazai, coming forward towards the desk. He has dark red hair and is dressed in the more casual attire required in this department, wearing a simple black dress shirt with a tan jacket.

“Can I help you?” asks the man. If he knows who Dazai is, he doesn’t show it. The question is polite, maybe even kind, like he thinks Dazai might be lost.

“I would be delighted if you could,” says Dazai, flashing his biggest grin and bringing his phone to his side again. “I’ve lost a package.”

“Do you have a tracking number?” asks the man calmly.

“Yes, I have the tracking number,” says Dazai, not sure if the man is mocking him or not.

“Well,” says the man, a hint of a smile showing, “Can I see it? Then maybe I can find it for you.”

Dazai doesn’t know what to think, but he quickly schools his features into a blank expression. He raises his phone again, putting Chuuya on mute and opening the email with the details of the shipment.

He offers his phone to the man, who reads the email with a frown on his face.

“Sorry about that,” says the man, handing Dazai back his phone. “We just switched to a new numbering system, and I think this got put in the wrong place using the old one. I’ll go find it for you.”

“Thank you,” says Dazai, still not sure what to make of the man.

The man just nods, turning to go back from the way he came. He waves to the secretary as he goes, who’s on her way back. She’s got a tight smile on her face as she approaches.

“Mr. Bennet is out right now,” she says nervously. “But he should be back soon if you’re willing to wait, Mr. Dazai.”

Dazai shakes his head, fighting off a smile (*Mr. Dazai?*). “That won’t be necessary. Apparently this department isn’t full of only useless people.”

“Oh,” says the woman, clearly unsure if she’s included in the category or not. “Is Oda helping you?”

“If that’s the tall redhead, yes,” says Dazai, walking slightly away from the desk, signaling the end of his interest in talking to the secretary.

He unmutes his phone and brings it back up to his ear. "It seems Ace hasn't infected the whole place with his stupidity," he says into the phone.

"Did you fucking mute me?" asks Chuuya angrily.

"I was busy," says Dazai flippantly.

"Then why did you fucking call me?" asks Chuuya loudly.

"Why did you stay on the phone?" asks Dazai back, grinning at the aggravated intake of breath on the other end of the line.

"I'm so going to punch you the next time I see you," says Chuuya.

Dazai would let him punch him as many times as he wanted if it meant he got to see him sooner. "You're becoming so violent."

"That's because-," Chuuya starts to say before Dazai cuts him off again. He sees the man he'd spoken to walking towards him with a large box.

"Oh, I think those are my calendars," says Dazai excitedly. "Hold please," he directs again. He mutes the phone and puts it in his pocket this time.

"Here you are," says the man, putting the box down in front of Dazai. "You need help carrying this somewhere?"

Dazai is slightly insulted at the (true) implication that he can't handle it himself. But he really doesn't want to carry it all the way back to his office. "If it went where it was originally supposed to that would be nice," he ends up saying.

"Sure thing," says the man, amused rather than offended. "Osamu Dazai's office, right? That you?"

"That's me," confirms Dazai. "And you are?"

"Sakunosuke Oda," says the other man, reaching out a hand to shake.

Dazai takes it, slightly bewildered. This is not the usual reaction he gets around PMR. He doesn't hate it though. "Thanks for your help."

"No problem," says Oda. He gestures to the package. "Do you need this right away or is it fine if I deliver it a little later? I was in the middle of something else when I saw you standing here."

"Later is fine," Dazai finds himself saying, despite his earlier insistence he needed the package right away. It isn't actually that big of a priority.

"I'll see you later then," says Oda, giving a wave and picking up the package. He carries it away with him as he goes. Dazai watches him, still more than a little puzzled at the whole interaction.

He pushes it aside, exiting the shipping department and taking out his phone again. The fact that the call is still ongoing on the screen brings a smile to his face.

“Have you ever met a Sakunosuke Oda?” asks Dazai as he unmutes it again.

“I don’t actually know everyone,” says Chuuya, apparently not angry about the muting and holding this time around, he’d probably expected it. “Especially the shipping guys. Everyone knows most of them are in some kind of deep shit to end up working for Ace.”

“I know,” says Dazai. “But he seemed different. He was surprisingly helpful.”

“Thank god,” says Chuuya sarcastically. “What would have happened if you hadn’t gotten your precious calendars?”

“These calendars are essential Port Mafia Records merchandise,” says Dazai. “These calendars are the culmination of hours of hard work. The money these calendars will make will help pay for the three guitars you’ve replaced this year alone.”

Chuuya snorts, but then his tone shifts to something less pleased. “I’ve got to go.”

“Later, chibi,” says Dazai, trying not to let how disappointed he is show in his voice.

“Text me,” says Chuuya. He says it more like an order (he always sees through Dazai despite how much actual effort Dazai puts in). Then he hangs up.

Dazai’s mood plummets as he heads back towards his office. There is one bright spot of interest in the rest of his day to look forward to though. Sakunosuke Oda is going to be visiting his office, and Dazai is strangely eager, mostly intrigued at the mystery the man presents. It’ll be a good distraction anyway, and all Dazai lives for these days is a good distraction.

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## **April, One Year, Two and a Half Months Since the Release of Corruption**

Doing interviews is different with The Black Lizards than it had been with Dazai. There are the obvious reasons, like he doesn’t have to answer as many questions. Kajii answers a lot of them himself. Tachihara chimes in occasionally. Gin almost never answers unless the question is asked to her directly.

Some things don’t change though, they still get the same old useless questions.

“All of you are young and single,” says the magazine writer who’s interviewing them. She smiles brightly. “Are there any sparks of romance between bandmates?”

They all exchange glances then burst out laughing, even Gin is giggling.

“They’re like babies,” says Kajii, still cackling.

“You couldn’t pay me to date any of them,” adds Chuuya, smirking.

“No,” says Gin so firmly it sets off a new round of laughter.

“Alright,” says the woman, her smile a little less happy. “I’ve just got a few more questions. Chuuya, what’s it like going from playing in a duo to being in a band?”

Chuuya hates when they single him out like this, but it always inevitably happens. He forces down a scowl. “It’s been great,” he says. “It’s allowed me to get into a whole different kind of music.”

“What does Dazai think of the band?” asks the writer.

Chuuya has to admire the boldness of the question. While not strictly prohibited, it’s well known by now that Chuuya doesn’t answer questions about Dazai (Chuuya doesn’t even mind that he’d been specifically told he isn’t allowed to. He doesn’t want to fucking talk about it anyway, especially not to the press.)

“You’d have to ask Dazai,” says Chuuya coolly.

“Is there still a chance of another Double Black album in the future?” asks the writer, not deterred by his evasion.

There fucking better be if Chuuya has anything to do with it. But he just says, “It’s a possibility. Who knows what will happen down the line? I’m happy where I am right now.”

“Thank you for your time,” says the woman, speaking to all of them again. They all smile and thank her.

“You’re getting scarily good at that,” says Tachihara to him once she’s left.

“Fuck off,” says Chuuya. He hates lying, he doesn’t want to get better at it. He’d prefer to never do another interview where people ask him about Dazai and he has to give vague bullshit answers.

Dazai’s never met someone like Oda before. Ever since their first encounter, Dazai keeps being surprised at how genuinely nice the other man is, and with barely any effort.

When Oda had come to deliver the package to his office he’d struck up a conversation with Dazai easily. He hadn’t been put off at all by that fact that they were in the executive suite or that Dazai outranked him by a mile. He’d asked Dazai about his office lawn chairs without any hesitation.

Dazai had made some comment about how they were quality chairs, but he'd been impressed by Oda's bluntness. Dazai spends so much time surrounded by people who lie and agree with anything he says. It had been refreshing to have someone treat him like an actual person.

Oda had left after a few minutes, but Dazai found himself seeking him out again with a different shipping problem a week later. Instead of giving it to someone else, he'd gone down to the shipping department himself.

Oda hadn't looked surprised to see him. Apparently switching to the new system had been resulting in a lot of mix ups. Dazai had been the one who'd been surprised when Oda had asked him if he wanted to get lunch after he'd solved his problem.

Dazai had agreed (figuring Chuuya would be proud of him for eating and not shutting himself away in his office.) Oda had led the way out of PMR's office and a little further down the block to a curry place Dazai had never been to. It was a small family-owned restaurant, and it'd reminded Dazai of the places he and Chuuya had used to eat at on tour. He'd snapped a quick picture to send to him later.

Dazai had figured lunch would be a one time thing, but it's becoming a regular occurrence. Dazai likes spending time with Oda. Oda remains unfazed no matter what Dazai throws at him. Dazai can whine and complain about work then switch to verbally tearing down whatever artist has irritated him and Oda just listens, commenting once in a while.

At first it had been kind of a game for Dazai to try to get a reaction out of the calm man, but now he finds himself saying whatever comes to mind in front of Oda without thinking about it. Dazai is rarely this honest in front of others, it's strange how it doesn't make him anxious at all.

Right now Dazai is going on a tangent about an issue he's having with someone in accounting as they eat their curry (although Dazai gets his much milder than Oda does.) "It can't be that hard to push a few buttons and move the money where I need it."

Dazai is about to launch into a different rant about Akutagawa when Oda cuts in. "If you're having an accounting issue, why don't you just ask Ango for help?"

"Ango Sakaguchi?" Dazai raises an eyebrow. Sakaguchi is one of the higher ups in the accounting department, he often handled more discrete work that Mori needed done quietly. Dazai has never met him though, and he's curious how Oda knows him.

"Yeah, we can go see him after we finish," says Oda.

Dazai is intrigued by the idea, so he stops talking so much and eats as much as he ever does of his food. After they're done he follows Oda back to PMR, taking the elevator to one of the middle floors where Ango Sakaguchi's office is.

Oda knocks on the door when he reaches it, being called in by the man inside. Oda opens the door, letting Dazai enter first.

Sakaguchi looks up from the mountain of papers he's going through on his desk. He's dressed more formally than Oda but more casually than Dazai in a simple brown suit. He flicks his dark hair out of his face to take in the people who've entered his office, they're clearly not who he had been expecting.

Sakaguchi frowns slightly, readjusting his glasses into place. "Executive Dazai, what can I do for you?"

"Oda told me that if I'm having a money issue you're the guy to go to," says Dazai lightly, walking over to examine the shelves Ango has in his office. They're filled with books, the majority of them looking academic and boring.

"Did he?" asks Sakaguchi, and Dazai sees him give Oda a look that he doesn't appreciate the endorsement. He quickly switches back to a more polite expression. "What can I do for you?"

"Don't be like that, Ango," says Oda, laughing slightly.

Dazai smiles at Sakaguchi with false sweetness. "We've never been properly introduced, I'm Osamu Dazai." He walks over and sticks out a hand for Sakaguchi to shake.

"Yes, I know of you," says Sakaguchi shortly, though he does take Dazai's hand and give it a brief and firm shake. "You're the one who broke the \$10,000 toilet on the Port Mafia Records' jet at age fifteen."

"Was it really \$10,000?" asks Dazai, excitedly rather than with any regret. He and Chuuya are having an ongoing argument about which of them has the bigger damages tab, and this is sure to put him ahead.

Sakaguchi sighs quietly. "What can I help you with?"

Oda takes a seat in one of the chairs in front of the desk as Dazai tells Sakaguchi the details. Sakaguchi is surprisingly helpful, solving Dazai's problem in only a few minutes.

"How do you two know each other?" asks Dazai once the matter is settled. He'd been waiting for one of them to reveal how two people in entirely different departments seemed so familiar, but it's still unclear.

"We've know each other for a while," says Sakaguchi, adding no other details.

"We're friends," says Oda, shaking his head at the other man. "Drinking buddies. We go to this old hole in the wall after a long day and get a couple whiskeys." Oda turns to look at Dazai with a smile. "You should join us sometime."

"He's seventeen," says Sakaguchi, clearly disapproving.

"I'm your superior," points out Dazai, not sure whether he wants to accept the invitation. He tries to hide his surprise though.



“Because Ogai Mori makes demented business decisions that only he can follow,” mutters Sakaguchi under his breath, clearly not expecting Dazai to hear him.

It startles Dazai into a laugh, making him reevaluate his opinion of Sakaguchi as only an unpleasant stick in the mud. “Sure, I’m in,” says Dazai with a smirk.

“Hole in the wall” is a good descriptor for The Lupin. It’s located in a basement and doesn’t have any windows. It’s quiet, and there’s not many tables inside. The three of them are sitting at the bar, and they’re some of the few customers. The only other people in the place are a couple at a table in the back corner, speaking to each other too softly for the sound to carry much.

Dazai likes the place immediately, it’s weird enough to appeal to him. The bartender is wearing a crimson vest and hadn’t batted an eye at Dazai’s age before pouring him a glass of whiskey. This outing is also helping him to not focus on the fact he hasn’t heard from Chuuya at all the past couple days. His phone feels like it’s been mocking him with its silence.

He’s never been much of a drinker, but the whiskey is more tolerable than the other types of alcohol he’s tried. Dazai looks over at his two drinking companions, taking in the way they seem more at ease here than they had at PMR. Oda is next to him, with Sakaguchi on the other side of Oda. The bartender had recognized them when they walked in, already pulling out a couple glasses before they’d ordered anything.

Dazai’s good opinion of the place starts to sour though when the sounds of *Lemon Bomb* start playing over the speakers. It’s not very loud, but Dazai scowls at the music.

“Hey, mind switching that to something else?” Oda asks the bartender, catching Dazai’s displeasure. The bartender agrees easily.

“So you don’t like your ex-partner’s new band?” asks Sakaguchi as the music switches to something less irritating.

The “ex” makes Dazai clench his glass a little tighter. “It has nothing to do with who’s playing it, the music is just unimpressive.”

“I kind of like Falling Camellia,” says Oda. “It might not be that impressive, but it’s nice to listen to if you’re in the mood for something a little loud and fierce. That Tachihara plays a mean drums.”

Dazai listens while keeping his face blank. It’s always interesting hearing the opinions of PMR’s employees who aren’t directly involved in music. He and Oda had talked a little bit about what type of music they’d liked before, and Dazai had been impressed when Oda had

named Natsume Soseki as one of his favorites. He's currently rethinking whether Oda has good taste now though.

"I think it's nothing special," cuts in Sakaguchi, shaking his head. It makes Dazai warm up to him a little more. "They're wasting Nakahara in that band."

Dazai can't keep his face blank anymore at that comment, a disgruntled look appearing out of his control. Their "feud" is well-known enough now that he usually doesn't have to suffer through the ordeal of talking about Chuuya with others.

"Sorry," says Oda to Dazai, giving Sakaguchi a disapproving look. "We didn't mean to make you uncomfortable. We know you two aren't getting along right now."

Dazai is about to tell some lie to smooth things over but Sakaguchi scoffs, throwing him off.

"Please," he says, rolling his eyes. "That's a bunch of nonsense created to drive up sales. Dazai and Nakahara spent so much time together before they even started working together that the accounting department had to combine their expenditure reports because it got too difficult to separate who spent what."

"That's an interesting theory," says Dazai, allowing just the hint of a smile. He tries to cover it up by taking a sip of his whiskey. This Ango fellow is way more knowledgeable than he'd realized. He supposes someone who's trusted enough to work with Mori directly is probably privy to more information than the rest of PMR's employees.

"So you aren't in a feud?" asks Oda, turning to Dazai, rolling with the revelation easily.

"I don't have time to waste feuding with a hat rack," says Dazai, making his voice light and cheery.

Oda takes it as a sign to not pursue it further. He unfortunately doesn't drop the subject of Chuuya entirely though. "I've never met him, but Nakahara's got one serious set of pipes. It must have been something to sing with him."

"I've met him," says Sakaguchi, frowning again. It seems to be a common expression for him. "I was tasked with talking to him about his spending habits before he left for tour with The Black Lizards. He called me Four-Eyes and told me to fuck off."

Dazai laughs, almost spilling his drink with the force of it, because that is classic Chuuya. It makes the pain of missing him flare more keenly. He doesn't really think before saying, "Chuuya could sing me under the table." Oda and Sakaguchi look surprised at the comment.

"Singing is the only thing Chuuya is better at than me," says Dazai quickly, holding up a hand for emphasis. "And toilet darts, although he has an unfair advantage as he lives where the game board is and gets far more opportunities to practice."

"Do you think you'll ever work together again?" asks Oda, not aware how the question makes Dazai want to break every bottle behind the bar.

He's not interested in entertaining the topic of the slug for any longer. "This place is interesting," says Dazai, tone hard enough to convey the feeling. "How did you find it?"

"I've been coming here for years," says Oda, not offended by Dazai's changing of the subject, "Long before I started working for PMR."

"How did you end up working in the shipping department?" asks Dazai, happy to start talking about anything else. "I thought Ace only hired shady ex-convicts and drug addicts who owed him favors."

"I am a drug addict," says Oda casually. Sakaguchi is frowning even deeper, and Dazai almost spits out the sip of whiskey he just took.

Oda laughs a little at his expression. "I'm clean now, I have been for years. But it does make finding a job harder."

"Should you be drinking?" asks Dazai, not able to hide the shock in his voice. He knows very little about addiction, but he got the feeling that was one of the basic rules.

"No," says Sakaguchi sourly, "He shouldn't." It's clearly a discussion they've had before.

"I've never had a problem with a glass of whiskey here or there," says Oda, shaking his head, but it's more affectionate than annoyed. "As long as I stay away from partying and heroin, I'm fine."

Dazai doesn't know what to say. The more he learns about Oda, the more interesting he is. He's distracted by his phone buzzing, and his pulse jumps as he tries to look calm as he pulls it out.

**[11:34pm Slug]: hirotu took my phone away after i accidentally broke the toilet on the tour bus**

Dazai smirks, typing out a quick reply, **You can't try and run up your tab now, that's cheating.**

"Who are you texting?" asks Oda as he puts his phone away.

"It's just work," says Dazai lightly. "So Ango, how did you end up working for PMR?"

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## **April 29, One Year & Three Months Since the Release of Corruption**

Chuuya is trying very hard not to be disappointed. He'd had a perfectly good birthday. After last year Hirotu hadn't scheduled any events for the day. The band had mostly just hung out, drinking and listening to music.

Despite their rocky beginnings, being on tour has smoothed out the edges of their group. They still don't see eye to eye on everything (well, most things), but they all can agree on how much they love the adrenaline rush that comes with a good concert.

At the start of the tour they'd all kind of done their own thing, Chuuya had really only hung out with Tachihara. But slowly over time they'd starting all hanging out, ending each show by having a drink and going over the highlights and mishaps together.

Chuuya is always going to think Kajii is a lunatic, but he's been forced to deal with the horrifying realization that he actually kind of likes him. He and Kajii share the same frenzied energy on stage, playing off each other easily.

Gin and Tachihara still snip at each other constantly, but Chuuya recognizes now that it doesn't mean they hate each other. Gin is still pretty quiet, but Tachihara always seems to know what she's feeling. Their rhythm section is tighter and more cohesive than ever.

So he'd had a good day with everyone, it'd been great not to be fussed over at all. It's everything he could have asked for in a birthday. He'd been able to have fairly long conversations with Kouyou and Arthur. Elise had actually video chatted with him for a while, pulling Mori into the screen to say happy birthday too.

The absence of one person shouldn't ruin the whole day.

But while Chuuya had tried to be patient throughout the day, it's getting close to midnight and he still hasn't heard anything from Dazai. He's laying in his hotel room alone, watching the time get later and later.

They'd texted a lot and talked on the phone occasionally right after Chuuya had left. It's starting to slowly taper off over time though.

He knows Dazai is busy, and he's somehow made a few *friends* from PMR now. Chuuya hadn't believed him when he'd first told him that. He's more than a little curious what kind of people Dazai would keep as friends. And he's happy that Dazai isn't alone and miserable. He's more relieved than jealous (okay, it's kind of close.)

Chuuya doesn't know what to do. He's never had to deal with Dazai ignoring him before. It makes him absurdly unsettled. Dazai has been a constant in his life since even before he'd wanted him to be.

He'd made a promise to himself that he wouldn't let himself be left behind this time, but he can't be the only one hanging on. Chuuya isn't interested in being the fool who gets startled when he's been cut off but hadn't realized it.

His stomach drops as he watches it officially become April 30th. Chuuya doesn't even know what the fuck he's going to say to Dazai the next time he speaks to him. He wants to call him an asshole but also doesn't want to let him know how much this fucking hurts.

Chuuya remembers his naive declaration last year, *Next year we will be in L.A. I don't care who I have to threaten to make it happen.*

Not only is he very much not in L.A, he also is alone. He feels so fucking stupid.

A knock at his door makes him jump. He almost ignores it, but it could be one of his bandmates or Hirotsu. He walks to the door, trying to make it look like he hadn't been having a small meltdown.

It is not someone he knows waiting at the door though. It's a man wearing a uniform and holding a big package.

"Delivery for Chuuya Nakahara," says the man. "Sorry for the late hour, I was running short on time." He emphasizes the word short oddly.

Chuuya has to smother a wild cackle, so relieved he could hug the man. He doesn't though, he just quickly signs for the package and shuts the door behind him.

He's dialing Dazai's number before he even gets it open properly, shoving the phone into his shoulder.

"Chibi," says Dazai cheerfully, picking up after the first ring.

"How much did you have to pay a delivery service to get them to deliver a package at exactly 12:01AM, you freak?" asks Chuuya, voice a mixture of fondness and exasperation.

"The timing wasn't an issue," says Dazai. "It was actually much harder to get him to call you short. He was very concerned about offending celebrity singer Chuuya Nakahara."

"You're the worst," says Chuuya as he finally gets the box open. He has to move some packaging material to reveal what's in it. Dazai seems to be waiting for him to open it before responding again.

Chuuya snorts when he sees what's inside. "Did you get me a box filled with the cheapest wine you could find?"

"It is the cheapest wine available for sale in all of the United States," says Dazai proudly. "But that's not all there is."

Chuuya's breath catches a little when he pulls out the lone bottle that doesn't match the others. It's a 1889 Petrus, and insanely expensive. He can't believe Dazai would blow that much money on him. But then he notices that the cork of the bottle looks like it's been tampered with.

"Did you fucking open the Petrus?" asks Chuuya, pulling the bottle closer to examine it.

"Yup," says Dazai easily. "You should check what's inside."

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" asks Chuuya as he pulls the cork out. He's hit with the smell of... salt.

"I figured you might be missing your ocean," says Dazai, tone a bit more serious now. "So I wanted to send you some that you can keep with you."

Chuuya has never fully explained his attachment to the ocean to Dazai, but he knows Dazai is aware of how important it is to him. He'd showed him the song he'd started to write about it.

The gift means more to Chuuya than he knows how to say. It's like a piece of home, which Dazai also knows. But even more than that it's a physical reminder of the thing that he turns to when he struggles the most with thoughts of whether he's human.

"You're unbelievable," says Chuuya. His voice comes out slightly scratchy. He knows Dazai will recognize it as his version of a thank you.

Dazai makes a pleased humming noise in response.

Chuuya has to know though. "Please tell me you ordered a Petrus that was already empty."

"Of course not," says Dazai happily. "I'm no cheapskate. Chibi deserves only the best."

"What did you do with the wine?" asks Chuuya, even though he knows he shouldn't.

"Poured it out," says Dazai matter of factly. "I don't care much for wine."

"You're the worst," says Chuuya again, laughing this time.

"Happy eighteenth birthday, Chuuya," says Dazai, voice soft in a tone Chuuya rarely hears him use.

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### **Late May, One Year & Four Months Since the Release of Corruption**

Dazai really doesn't want to make this call, but putting it off won't make it any easier. Besides, he can suffer through a little discomfort for Chuuya's sake. It wouldn't be the first time.

It's late enough that Chuuya should be alone, The Black Lizards hadn't played a show today. Dazai is sitting in his office at his desk. He scrolls down in his contacts to **Slug** and hits the call button, trying to fight down the nerves he gets as the phone rings.

Chuuya doesn't answer until the last ring, and Dazai is almost disappointed that he does pick up.

"What's up?" asks Chuuya, slightly muffled. It's obvious that he had been sleeping.

"Just checking up on my dog," says Dazai, voice light and airy.

Chuuya is not impressed by his stalling. "I'm hanging up."

"Do you need me to come out there?" Dazai forces himself to ask before Chuuya gets off the phone. The question comes out a little strangled.

There is a pause before Chuuya answers, his voice low and very awake now. "Why would I need you to come out here?"

“We both know what next week is, Chuuya,” says Dazai. Dazai tries to say it as kindly as he can, tries not to make it an attack.

Just the thought of it makes his chest ache a little. He still vividly remembers the panic he’d felt last year when he couldn’t find Chuuya, and his recollection of their conversation on the beach is even sharper.

Dazai is willing to do anything to try and remind Chuuya that he’s human, even going against Mori’s orders and putting a wrench in all his own carefully constructed plans. He’d get on a plane in a heartbeat if Chuuya asked him to.

“I think I know better than you do what it is and what I feel about it,” says Chuuya sharply.

His anger doesn’t really surprise Dazai, though he had hoped he would react differently. It’s so much harder to do this over the phone. Chuuya still picks up more in his voice than anyone else could, but Dazai wishes he could *see* him, be able to explain himself with more than just his words.

But Chuuya respects one thing, honestly. So Dazai is honest as he says, “I just want to help.”

Chuuya sighs, and Dazai can picture him running a hand through his hair like he usually does when he’s like this. “I don’t need help.”

“Don’t lie,” says Dazai, getting annoyed despite himself. It’s not fair if he’s being honest but Chuuya won’t.

“I’m not lying,” says Chuuya, tone going cold. “I don’t need help and I don’t need you.”

The words hit Dazai like a blow to the gut. He can’t form a response.

“I meant I don’t need you for this,” says Chuuya after a pause, voice much gentler. “And I didn’t mean to snap at you, I just...” Chuuya trails off.

“It’s fine,” says Dazai, and now he’s not sure if he’s lying or not. He swallows roughly. “I’ll let you get back to sleep.”

“It’s because of you,” says Chuuya quietly. “I can handle it by myself this year because of... you already said everything I needed to hear.”

The phone trembles a little in Dazai’s hand. “Well, you know what they say about the power of repetition.”

“I’m going to be fine,” says Chuuya, the words spoken like a promise.

Well, at least one of them will be. “Okay,” says Dazai. “I’ll let you go then.”

“No,” says Chuuya quickly, surprising him. “Don’t. I haven’t heard from you in a while.”

Chuuya doesn’t say it like an accusation, but Dazai thinks the guilt might consume him anyway.

Lately Dazai feels like he barely even has the time to think properly. He's running on fumes. Chuuya would be furious if he knew how little Dazai is eating and sleeping.

The amount of work he's been given just keeps multiplying. Every success leads to a new project being shoved into his lap. Mori keeps piling it on, smiling all the while. He's highly complimentary of Dazai's work in executive meetings as he unloads even more things for Dazai to do.

Dazai isn't going to give him the satisfaction of seeing him stumble under the pressure. So he takes every new task on with an answering smile, completing it to perfection. He is not going to lose this game, he would rather carve his vocal cords out and never sing again.

In addition to managing Akutagawa, he's now been given Yumeno Kyusaku to oversee as well. And Q makes Akutagawa look stable and friendly. The child is a literal psychopath. Dazai has to stop himself from losing his temper about their cruel antics almost every time he sees them.

Q is making steady progress, unlike Akutagawa who Dazai still can't coerce into pushing past his limits no matter what he does.

The only enjoyable parts of Dazai's days are when he's at The Lupin with Ango and Odasaku. It's become a routine for the three of them to meet there at the end of a long day. Sometimes it feels like they can read Dazai's mind by sending a text suggesting going there when Dazai is ready to scream in frustration at his constant stream of work.

Dazai knows he's let things with Chuuya slip, but he justifies it by telling himself that his end goal is always Double Black being put back together. He's also too exhausted to come up with things to say to Chuuya that aren't *I miss you* and *seventy three days until you get back now*.

Bantering with Chuuya is instinctive, but Dazai is sick of having meaningless conversations about nothing. He misses actually *talking* to Chuuya. He really does like Ango and Odasaku, but they don't know him like Chuuya does. They like Dazai, but they can't see through all his facades instantly like Chuuya can.

"I've been slightly busy," says Dazai, the words feeling inordinately inadequate for everything he's dealing with. "The work of an executive is relentless."

"Kouyou said you've taken on another artist," says Chuuya, tone hard to understand (this is part of the reason Dazai can't enjoy these phone calls.)

"Yumeno Kyusaku," confirms Dazai. "Or Q as they intend to go by."

"What are they like?" asks Chuuya.

Dazai snorts a little under his breath. He could spend an entire day listing things that were wrong with Q, and he still wouldn't come close to describing all of them. "They're a handful," is what he settles on.



“I meant what is their voice like?” asks Chuuya, tone unreadable again. “What kind of music is it?”

A knock at Dazai’s door keeps him from answering. Relentless may be too light of a word. Dazai pulls the phone away to call out, “Enter.”

He bring the phone back up to his ear as he watches one of the members of the marketing staff come in. “I have to go,” says Dazai stiffly.

“Oh,” says Chuuya. It’s one word, but it hangs in the air brutally. “Alright then.”

Dazai doesn’t get a chance to try and rectify the situation before Chuuya hangs up. He stares at the phone for a moment, debating calling him back. But the man anxiously hovering in the entryway of his office takes precedent.

He just has to be patient. Once Dazai pulls off everything and they’re allowed to play music together again everything will be fine.

Still, the animosity in Chuuya’s voice continues to echo in Dazai’s mind for a long time.

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### **June 18, Nearly One Year & Five Months Since the Release of Corruption**

It’s another late night at the office in a series of late nights that have started to make the word late lose all meaning. Dazai isn’t even thinking about his birthday. He’s never cared much to celebrate it anyway. The only one who had made the day worthwhile in the past couple years had been Chuuya, and things with him are decidedly precarious right now.

Dazai is used to constant intrusions at his door, his old feelings of peace and solitude in his office a distance memory. But even he’s a little annoyed at an interruption this close to midnight.

Dazai stalks over to the door, schooling his scowl into a more neutral expression. He isn’t prepared for what’s waiting for him though. It’s a man in a delivery service uniform, rolling a large box on a dolly. He looks even more displeased than Dazai does to be here.

The delivery man doesn’t look up at him as he opens the door, reading off his clipboard instead. “Package for...Obama Doozy?”

Dazai actually lets out a genuine laugh, that’s how fatigued and stunned he is. “That’s me,” he says, gesturing for the man to come inside.

The man does, barely entering the room before shoving the package off his dolly with probably less care than he’s supposed to. He practically shoves the paperwork in Dazai’s face to get him to sign it.

“Thanks,” says Dazai brightly to the man as he hands it back. The man gives a stiff nod in return, exiting without another look.

Dazai looks over the tall box, struggling with a bunch of different emotions. It could only be from one person, but Dazai hadn't expected anything from him.

Chuuya hasn't been very subtle in making his displeasure with Dazai known these past few weeks. He'd barely communicated with Dazai at all, even when Dazai had been the one to reach out. It's been plaguing him for a while now how to make it up to Chuuya.

Dazai grabs a pair of scissors from his desk to reveal what's inside the box. His breathing comes a little shallower when he does.

It's a whiskey cabinet, a high-end one too. The dark wood exterior is expertly crafted.

Inside is the cheapest looking whiskey Dazai has ever seen.

Dazai can't even remember the last day he'd laughed genuinely more than once. But this manages to make him burst out in slightly uncontrollable laughter.

His phone is in his hand before he even makes a conscious decision to pick it up, fingers dialing the number swiftly. He examines the cabinet more carefully as it rings.

"Mackerel," says Chuuya as a greeting, voice infinitely less gruff than it's been the last times Dazai has talked to him.

"Slug," says Dazai, own voice filled with a warmth he doesn't try to hide. His emotions are too sharp to muster up any kind of concealment, and what's the point if it wouldn't fool Chuuya anyway?

"What's up?" asks Chuuya breezily.

"I'm opening your birthday present," says Dazai, noticing one bottle that doesn't look like the others. He pulls it out to examine it.

"Technically it was delivered before your birthday," says Chuuya smugly.

Dazai doesn't know much about whiskey, but the brand looks pricey. But knowing Chuuya, he wouldn't be satisfied with matching Dazai's present from a couple months ago, he would be trying to top it (as he somehow always manages to do.) Plus the color of the insides doesn't really look like whiskey.

Dazai unscrews the top of the bottle to get a closer look, instantly recoiling at the smell. Something about it seems familiar, in the way that you can't really forget something that gross.

"What did you put in this bottle?" asks Dazai, uncertain how this is supposed to be a gift.

"Don't tell me you don't remember," says Chuuya, just a touch mockingly. "I had it imported for you. I recalled how much you loved it when we had it in Beijing. I wanted you to have only the best alcohol to celebrate your eighteenth birthday."

Dazai recognizes the stench now as the absolute swill they'd been served on Chuuya's birthday practically a lifetime ago. The taste had been so nasty Dazai had to choke it down.

It's more than just a stupid container of beer. It's a memory, and a declaration that Chuuya still holds onto all the good times they had in the midst of this conflict.

As much as Dazai appreciates it, it pales in comparison to the simple fact that Chuuya had gotten him anything, that he hasn't stopped caring even when Dazai has inadvertently given him reasons to. Dazai doesn't know what he would do if that happened, the thought is impossible to contemplate.

"If you wanted to make me gag from the smell, you achieved your goal," says Dazai, a tiny and sincere smile on his face that he's thankful that no one can see.

"Oi," says Chuuya, and Dazai thinks he's going to complain about him not appreciating his gift, but as always Chuuya can't be predicted. "Don't tell me in your old age that your eye sight is slipping. There's more."

Dazai's smile slips away, looking to find what Chuuya is talking about. He catches sight of a tiny box hidden away behind the other bottles. He grabs it and opens it, even more dumbfounded when it reveals a toothbrush.

It has a button labeled Play Me, so Dazai presses it.

*"It's a Friday, and it's been a hell of a week,"* sings Chuuya's voice from the tiny speaker. *"Feels like I've been stuck in a losing streak."*

Dazai has to press the button again and turn it off to stop his eyes from watering. Chuuya obviously heard the music based on his laughter coming through the phone.

*Then do it for me, as a birthday present,* Dazai had requested as a naive almost sixteen year old. Chuuya had sang for him that year, unaware of the effect he'd had on him even then. Then the next year he'd done it again, enhancing the effect by picking songs that would make Dazai feel blatantly known and unnervingly happy.

If Dazai had been honest with himself (as he so rarely is), he would have admitted that Chuuya singing is what he would have asked for again as a gift this year, regardless of how impossible it would have been.

"I figured some music might help you jog that thickheaded brain of yours to stop running yourself into the ground like a dumbass," says Chuuya easily, once again unaware how much it means to Dazai.

*I love it,* thinks Dazai to himself, *I love you.* He's too scraped raw to come up with excuses to dance around those simple and unavoidable facts. It's funny how every year he thinks he's finally beaten Chuuya in April with the better gift only to be starkly put in his place in June every time.

"Thank you," says Dazai, trying to put how much he means it into the two tiny words.

Chuuya seems to get some of it, based on the way his voice shifts to be more delicate and sincere as he says, “Happy birthday, Dazai.”

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### **July, One Year, Five and a Half Months Since the Release of Corruption**

“Odasaku,” whines Dazai. “Tell Ango to stop bullying me.”

“Not indulging your childish antics is not bullying you,” protests Ango, typical frown in place.

“Play nice you two,” says Oda, always the peacekeeper. He’s the second kindest person Dazai has ever met, and that’s only because the first is almost impossible to top.

“I’ve got to get going,” says Ango, looking at his watch. He picks up his glass and downs the rest of it.

“So soon?” asks Oda. He always likes it best when it’s the three of them.

“I have a meeting with Mori in the morning,” says Ango, frown more pronounced than usual. “It wouldn’t do well to disappoint the boss.”

“Goodnight then,” says Oda, waving his drink at Ango in a goodbye.

“Spit in Mori’s eye for me, will you?” asks Dazai brightly.

Ango just shakes his head, muttering under his breath as he walks out the door.

Dazai makes a mental note to check up on what Mori is having Ango do when he gets a chance. He’s been losing track of keeping tabs on Mori far too frequently, getting caught up in his own work too much.

“Why do you hate Mori so much?” asks Oda, giving Dazai a searching look. “Did he do something to you?”

“Have you met the man?” asks Dazai, tone flippant. He takes a long sip of his whiskey.

“It seems personal,” observes Oda. He keeps his voice non-confrontational. He always asks Dazai personal questions the same way, genuinely wanting to know the answers but not pushing him if he doesn’t want to give them.

Dazai doesn’t trust easily, but it’s hard not to trust someone like Odasaku. He’s a genuinely good person, the rare kind that Dazai almost never meets. The kind of person who when he’s not at work *fosters orphans*, and doesn’t even mention it to people. It’s obvious he’s doing it because he wants to, not for any kind of recognition.

“It’s not a big deal,” Oda had said when Dazai had found out about it after around a month into their friendship. He’d smiled and shook his head. “I just help out where I can. I’ve got the space, and they’re good kids.”

But Dazai knows that all of their parents had been victims to crimes related to drugs, that Oda is also doing it as some form of penance. Oda is trying to right the wrongs of his past.

Dazai has never respected anyone more. Oda may be a lowly grunt worker in a shipping department for a more than a little corrupt record company, but his dedication and persistence to being an honorable man made him leagues better than anyone else at Port Mafia Records.

Dazai thinks over Oda's questions, unsure of the last time somehow had questioned his hatred of Mori. Most people just accepted it as fact. He can't remember Chuuya ever asking him about it.

"He was my manager before he was Port Mafia Records' CEO," says Dazai, voice blank of any emotions. "I was instrumental in helping him attain his new position."

"How old were you?" Oda looks offended on his behalf, which is nice.

"Fourteen," answers Dazai with a shrug. "I wasn't aware of what I was signing up for when I agreed to be one of Mori's clients."

"How does a fourteen year old kid factor in to the transition from one CEO to another?" asks Oda, a mixture of confused and angry.

"I didn't really have to do anything," says Dazai, trying not to frown at the unpleasant memories. "I was mostly just a necessary witness."

Oda's expression darkens. "There are rumors the old boss had to step down due to an unstable mental state."

Dazai can't help the wry smile from coming onto his face. Now that it's been this many years, he's far enough removed to recognize the brilliance of Mori pretending to negotiate a recording contract for Dazai while really working to document the previous boss's psychiatric problems.

He's still not entirely sure how Mori had wormed his way into the vacant position after the fact, but by then he'd known that it was probably not worth looking into all that closely. His opinion of Mori as a vile creature had been cemented.

Dazai hadn't been in a great place at fourteen, and he hadn't exactly liked Mori when he'd let him be his manager. But he had been under the ignorant impression that Mori had been serious when he'd said he was going to get Dazai signed by a label. He had been slightly eager for the opportunity.

When he'd discovered how he had been duped, he'd drastically changed his mind about his desire to record music. He wasn't going to let Mori use him as a pawn like that. But he also hadn't been interested in going back to living with his parents.

So Dazai had become Mori's apprentice of sorts, quickly picking up on the ins and outs of the music business. It had kept him occupied for a while until a tiny redhead with a transcendent voice had made him reconsider.

“Mori’s never really done anything to me personally,” says Dazai, because hurting a teenager’s feelings really has no weight compared to all the nasty things Mori has been behind. “He’s just *rotten*, he always somehow finds a way to poison everything he touches.”

“Then why do you work for him?” asks Oda, eyes narrowed in confusion.

“It’s interesting,” says Dazai, smirking slightly. “I don’t regret choosing to work for PMR, if that’s what you’re thinking.” As much as PMR has taken from him, it’s given him things in return. Two redheads in particular.

“There are other record companies,” says Oda, still a little disgruntled. “You could work for one of them.

Dazai just smiles and finishes off his glass of whiskey. “I’m not going anywhere. And you also work for them too,” he points out.

“I have limited options,” says Oda, frowning. It’s not a typical look for him.

“Let’s get another round,” suggests Dazai, trying to lighten the mood. He flashes two fingers at the bartender, who moves to get them a refill.

Dazai holds out his glass with a flourish, and the bartender smiles a bit, used to his antics. But Dazai’s amusement lessens a little when some of the liquid misses the glass and gets his bandages wet.

“Gross,” he says with a pout, trying to wipe it off as much as he can on his suit jacket.

“Why do you wear those bandages?”

Dazai’s eyes widen at the question, looking up to see Oda looking back at him with a serious expression, though it’s not aggressive.

The question shouldn’t be that surprising. As opposed to being asked about why he hates Mori, he’s been asked about the bandages constantly. The press had asked him over and over again during the Double Black tour, but Dazai had always had a cheery way to distract them, or Chuuya had forcefully intervened to get them to back off.

Dazai had never entertained answering the question. But right now, when the man who’s been nothing but a steadfast friend to Dazai these past horrible few months, he finds himself considering it.

It’s not even that special of a story. He’d simply tried to kill himself when he was ten years old, and he hadn’t been very imaginative so he’d tried to do it by cutting open his arms in horizontal lines from his wrists to halfway between his elbows and his shoulders. Instead, all he’d gotten was a lot of pain and a bunch of jagged scars (he hadn’t been very steady with his cuts.)

He’d woken up in the hospital with bandages wrapped around the cuts, and the very disappointed faces of his parents. They’d never been particularly nurturing, but even they had to intervene when their child had tried to kill themselves.

Dazai had been sent to the best shrink money could afford, and eventually come to the conclusion that he didn't actually want to die. He just wanted to find something that could help fill the emptiness he felt.

Music had turned out to be the most effective way to do that.

Dazai had taken to music almost instinctively, turning the chords on the page into sound with ease. His parents had jumped on the idea, shoving him into music lessons fervently. After Dazai no longer had the urge to take his life, they had considered their part in the matter finished and went back to keeping their distance. Although they no longer required Dazai to come to society events with them, apparently having a formerly suicidal child was a big social faux pas.

Dazai had worn the bandages while his arms had healed. Then when it had come time to take them off, he couldn't stand the looks he got when people saw his scars. Dazai hates nothing more in this world than pity.

So he'd simply put them back on, despite no longer having a medical need for them. His ten year old self also hadn't liked the way how people (correctly) assumed he was covering up scars on his arms, so he'd started doing his whole body to throw them off. His parents hadn't stopped him, they were just glad he wasn't doing anything worse.

Over time it had just become part of his routine to wrap himself up in bandages. He's fairly far removed from the apathy he'd felt towards life when he was ten, but he still doesn't enjoy the idea of the physical evidence of those moments of his life being on display for others. He doesn't care if people think he's odd for wearing them, he'd rather have that than people looking at him with *pity*.

Plus they help him keep warm. He's always run slightly colder than most.

He can't bring himself to tell Oda this though. Not because he doesn't trust him enough, the thing holding him back is Chuuya. It doesn't feel right to tell somebody else before he gets the chance to tell him. Dazai would have told him if he'd ever asked even before he'd left for tour, but Chuuya never pushed Dazai. It's as endearing as it is frustrating. Dazai never knows how to be the one to bring it up himself.

Ever since his birthday he's been less worried about how infrequently he and Chuuya talk. Dazai knows that Chuuya won't give up on him. It's been a small comfort with how almost everything else in his life is atrocious right now.

Dazai certainly can't tell Chuuya something like why he wear his bandages over the phone. So he's where he's been since February, counting down the days until he'll be back in L.A.

Oda speaks up before he comes up with a way to say any of that. "Never mind. Here, let me get you a napkin."

"Thanks, Odasaku," says Dazai, accepting the cheap bar napkin with a huge grin.

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## **August, One Year, Six Months and One Week Since the Release of Corruption**

The longer Chuuya sits waiting in Dazai's apartment, the more anxious he gets.

Chuuya had genuinely enjoyed touring with The Black Lizards. He loves being on stage no matter the context. Playing music always puts him in a good mood, and he'd ended up growing really close with the band. He doesn't regret being assigned to play with them. It *had* helped him grow as a musician, even if it hadn't been his choice.

But during the last couple months the ever-growing space between him and Dazai had started to chip away at his satisfaction with the tour.

Chuuya knows he's outrageously busy. Kouyou had said so when he'd made brief comments about how Dazai had been barely speaking to him. She'd sounded concerned about him, saying that he always looked like he was in the middle of a dangerous scheme that was teetering on the edge of a knife.

Dazai has always been cunning and in the middle of a bunch of plans, but Chuuya has never been this in the dark on what those plans are. He doesn't understand why Dazai is pushing himself to the brink, what his objective is. He knows that he can't really care that much about the careers of Yumeno Kyusaku and Ryuunosuke Akutagawa.

Dazai has never been ambitious. He wouldn't do all this to advance his career. He doesn't care about PMR as a company, he's only ever been interested in how it lets him be involved in music.

Chuuya greatly cares for and respects his bandmates in The Black Lizards. But frankly, he's done his part and he's ready to get back to making music with substance again. And he needs Dazai to do that. He's not interested in writing music without him. He'd tried to do that this past year, and it just hadn't been the same.

He's fairly convinced that if he and Dazai work together they can get Mori to agree to allow them to release another album. Mori isn't unreasonable. With Dazai's genius and Chuuya's favor with the boss, it shouldn't be impossible. Even if it isn't possible immediately at least Chuuya won't be stuck wondering or caught in another band that no matter how much fun it had been had also been restricting.

After The Black Lizards had finished playing their last show, Chuuya had been too restless to wait any longer. He'd taken the first available plane back to L.A. and turned off his phone to avoid being scolded for it.

In all of his grand plans, he had expected Dazai to be home when he showed up.

Chuuya had flung open the door to his apartment with the key he still had only to be greeted with darkness. His mood had slipped, but he'd tried not to get too upset. He hadn't exactly warned Dazai he was coming.

But it's been a couple hours now, and Dazai is still nowhere to be seen. Chuuya's lying on the couch in Dazai's living room, and he's such a minimalist Chuuya is running out of things to



do to keep himself occupied. He's starting to wonder if he should go into the office to try and track him down. Or he could turn his phone back on and risk getting yelled at by Hirotsu.

Voices outside the apartment keep him from taking either option. Chuuya's chest squeezes slightly when he recognizes one of them as Dazai's. He sits up, smile already on his face.

"You should get some sleep," says a deep voice that Chuuya hasn't heard before. "And drink some water."

"I'm fine, Odasaku," says Dazai, but Chuuya can hear the fondness in his voice. "Really, you're such a worrywart. You didn't have to walk me home."

"You were stumbling when we left the bar," says the other man. He doesn't sound annoyed about helping Dazai, if anything he seems amused.

"I've always been clumsy," says Dazai, flippant tone jarringly familiar.

"Goodnight Dazai." The voices are right outside the door now, louder than before.

"Night Odasaku!" calls out Dazai. Chuuya hears his keys twisting in the lock. The door flings open with Dazai's usual carelessness, hitting the wall with the force.

Chuuya stands up for some reason. His hands are clenched tightly at his sides. All of his plans of what he were going to say are slipping away, too caught up in the conversation he'd just witnessed. It's shifting Chuuya's perception of the situation, his anticipation souring into something darker.

Dazai appears in the doorway, dressed in his usual suit. His hair is slightly longer than he'd used to wear it, bangs hanging in his face. He'd clearly grown a bit too, now slightly towering over Chuuya. His dark eyes are a bit less focused than Chuuya is used to seeing them.

Even with all of the negative thoughts and insecurities running through Chuuya's mind, the sight of him still makes his pulse spike.

It takes Dazai a split second to notice him, then his face breaks into a humongous smile.

"You're here," says Dazai, slightly breathless.

"I caught an early flight," says Chuuya hollowly, noting Dazai's flushed cheeks and lazy stance. "You're drunk."

"You're here," repeats Dazai, not making a move from his spot in the doorway.

Chuuya has been angry at Dazai many times before, but this isn't exactly anger. He had been under the impression that Dazai had been isolating himself from everyone, not singling Chuuya out. But that clearly wasn't the fucking case.

In all of their arguments, even when they were fifteen and genuinely couldn't stand each other, Dazai's actions had never hurt Chuuya. They had been annoying, but never wounding.

But the fact that Chuuya is the only one that Dazai is cutting off feels like Dazai has just viciously stabbed him in the back.

It's almost like a betrayal.

But possibly the worst part is how open and genuine he'd sounded with the man who must have been Oda Sakunosuke. It aches that Dazai's known the guy a couple months and is so effortlessly himself with him. It had taken Chuuya *years* to see Dazai like that.

He'd never really minded that he didn't mean to Dazai what Dazai meant to him, but he'd thought he at least meant *something*.

"Get some sleep, mackerel," says Chuuya, trying to keep his voice normal. He goes to squeeze past Dazai to leave the apartment, berating himself for being so stupid and coming home early for this.

Then Dazai's arms trap him from behind, keeping him from going anywhere. Dazai leans his head on Chuuya's shoulder. "How am I supposed to sleep without Chuuya?"

The emotion and sincerity of the single sentence makes Chuuya pause, still hurting but unable to deny that Dazai clearly doesn't feel nothing towards him.

Chuuya isn't ready to let this behavior go unanswered, but he needs Dazai sober to be able to really talk to him. It's also hard for Chuuya to stay mad when Dazai is wrapped around him like this, the person he'd longed for every day for the past six months.

Chuuya had missed him so much. He would never sing again if it meant he'd never have to go through that again. Being away hadn't dulled any of his feelings, if anything they'd grown. It's why Dazai's silence had made him so unsettled. His emotions are so volatile right now because he's so terrified of losing him.

Chuuya takes a deep breath, leaning into Dazai's embrace. "Idiot," he says quietly. "You've been sleeping without me for months."

"You're here," says Dazai again, though it's slightly muffled as he speaks the words mostly into Chuuya's shoulder. He lifts his head then, sounding slightly confused. "Did you get shorter?"

"No, asshole, you got taller," says Chuuya, laughing a little despite himself. "Fine, I'll stay here."

The happy noise Dazai lets out helps to thaw Chuuya's doubts even more. Although Chuuya does have to stop him from hanging off him like this, they're still in the doorway with the door wide open.

Dazai grumbles as Chuuya pushes him away but he does move fully inside, leaning against the wall. Chuuya shuts the door and locks it. He looks away to find Dazai looking at him forlornly enough that it makes Chuuya nervous.

"I don't have any tea," says Dazai, voice pitifully sad.

Chuuya snorts, rubbing a hand against his eyes. He's never dealt with a drunk Dazai before. This had not been how he had been expecting tonight to go.

"It's fine," Chuuya reassures him, somewhere between amused and annoyed. "I don't need any. I'd rather just go to sleep. I'm exhausted."

"Okay," says Dazai, though he still sounds displeased.

He leads the way in the apartment, and he's at least sober enough to walk steadily now. Chuuya follows behind, mind too fried to think too hard about anything. He had played a concert and then taken a plane before getting here. He'll try to sort out this mess in the morning.

Dazai leaves the lights off in the bedroom when they get there, moving through the dark with ease. Not that there's much for him to trip over, the place is spotless and has barely anything in it.

Chuuya takes a seat on the bed, pulling out his phone. He'll deal with that in the morning too. He sets it on Dazai's bedside table. Dazai quickly changes out of his suit and into sweats in the background.

Chuuya stands up as Dazai approach the bed. They both get in, Dazai instantly moving to slide next to Chuuya, his arm encircling his waste tightly.

"I need to fucking breathe," whispers Chuuya, twisting a little so that they're pressed together more comfortably. Dazai hums and loosens his grip a little, but it's still fairly secure.

Chuuya lies there and tries to let go of all the tension he's carying. Dazai's breathing deepens quickly, falling asleep easily. It takes Chuuya much longer before he's able to calm down enough to sleep too.

Dazai wakes up to the sight of Chuuya in his bed, sleeping with one arm wrapped around a pillow and the other covering his face. His throat catches. For a second, he thinks he's still dreaming. But even his imagination isn't good enough to conjure up this. Not to mention his mouth has that after whiskey taste that he wouldn't bring into a dream.

Six months looks devastatingly good on Chuuya. He's as short as ever, but his face has matured, shoulders broadening. It takes a lot of effort to look at him and not lie back down and pull him close.

But Dazai had planned for Chuuya arriving this afternoon and had stacked his morning so he would be free then.

It's a little ironic that the fact he'd drunk as much as he had last night was because his mind wouldn't shut up about how much he was anticipating today.

Dazai is both annoyed and impressed with his formerly inebriated self. He would have rather had all of his wits about him when seeing Chuuya again for the first time, but he doubts he would have had the courage while sober to demand he stay here.

Seeing Chuuya is like a blast of motivation after he'd been starting to run out of steam. It's a reminder of everything he's working towards. He'd always known it'd be worth it, but the physical proof eases a strain on his heart that had been growing.

Dazai sits up in bed, stretching a bit. He quickly reaches over to the side-table and takes the toothbrush that's sitting on top of it and shoves it into a drawer. He prays that Chuuya hadn't been able to see that in the dark last night. A revelation like that feels like it would cross some unspoken line.

He picks up his phone, already full of emails and notifications this early in the morning. Although Odasaku had also texted him checking on him. He sends him a message letting him know he's fine, the man treats Dazai like one of the kids he's fostering sometimes.

Dazai gets out of bed, trying not to wake up Chuuya. He's still in a little bit of disbelief that Chuuya had come straight here after his last concert and came to see Dazai. Dazai will have to think of a way to show him how much he appreciates it.

He goes to the bathroom and takes a quick shower, dressing in a fresh suit. Dazai comes back into his bedroom to see Chuuya sitting up in bed, looking out the window at the L.A. skyline, a small smile on his face.

(It's an incredibly dangerous sight, Dazai wants it to be something he sees regularly a frightening amount.)

Chuuya's smile slips away as he turns to look at him. His expression is more tumultuous than Dazai would expect from someone who just woke up.

"Where are you going?" asks Chuuya. His voice is harsh, and not just from sleeping.

"Work," says Dazai, raising an eyebrow, Chuuya's distress slightly puzzling. Dazai literally hadn't even said a word to him this morning that could have made him upset.

"We have things to discuss, mackerel," says Chuuya, crossing his arms.

"Can we discuss them later?" asks Dazai, moving over to the bedside table to pick up his phone.

"What's so important at work that you can't spare a fucking minute?" asks Chuuya, now sounding even angrier.

Dazai sighs, he has a million things he has to do this morning. He had not allotted time to have a blowout fight with Chuuya, which this display has the inklings of.

“Can’t you be a good little dog and wait for your master to come home?” asks Dazai, snapping a little. He’s been looking forward to Chuuya being home somewhat obsessively, and Chuuya couldn’t even wait a day before picking a fight with him.

Chuuya doesn’t snap back like he expects him to though. He just gives Dazai a long look, face hard to read. It makes Dazai even more irritable.

“I have to go,” says Dazai, making his voice blank so he doesn’t start yelling at Chuuya. Dazai hadn’t yelled at anyone in the six months he’d been gone. In all his longing he’d forgotten how Chuuya is also the only one capable of pulling out his uglier side like this.

“I guess your priorities are clear,” says Chuuya in a voice Dazai has never heard from him before. His expression is unfamiliar too, eyes boring into Dazai with his mouth set firmly.

Dazai sighs again. “Look, I’ll see you later slug. We can talk then.”

Chuuya doesn’t answer, and Dazai leaves the room trying to fight off a scowl.

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### **October, One Year, Eight and a Half Months Since the Release of Corruption**

Dazai doesn’t think anything of it when he gets the news. He hears about it in passing at work, that the head of PMR’s Southeast Asian division was in a terrible car accident and didn’t make it. It’s the type of office gossip that doesn’t register as worth paying attention to. He’d never met Arthur Rimbaud or worked with him. He thinks it’s probably not great for PMR, but that’s about it.

Dazai is too busy putting the finishing touches on the proposal for Akutagawa’s solo album. After nearly a year of painstaking work, it’s finally coming to fruition. All those hours Dazai had listened to the other boy do scales and butcher the entire PMR discography are at long last paying off.

The sooner he can get it started the better. Dazai is more impatient than ever to get things back to the way they used to be.

Even though Chuuya is back in L.A, Dazai still barely sees him. It’s exasperating.

Chuuya is around. He catches him coming out of Kouyou’s office once in a while. He and The Black Lizards aren’t in a rush to start writing their next album, but Chuuya spends a lot of time with them just hanging out. Chuuya has taken up his piano lessons with Elise again too.

It’s exactly what Chuuya had been doing before he left for tour. But it feels different somehow. Dazai can’t put his finger on it.

He’d thought it might have had something to do with their argument he cut short back in August when Chuuya had first gotten back. He’d tried to bring it up to Chuuya after, but Chuuya had shut him down, saying it wasn’t important. And when Dazai had pushed Chuuya had just gotten angry. So he’d backed off.

There seems to be an undercurrent in their conversations now that Dazai doesn't understand. Chuuya still insults him and acts like nothing has changed in the brief moments they do talk, but it's like there's an invisible barrier in place.

Dazai wants to tear that barrier down, so he's become a bit fixated on making this proposal perfect.

He's at the office later than night when he gets a call from Tachihara, which is strange. Dazai doesn't think Tachihara has ever called him before. He'd thought he'd unknowingly made an enemy of him for life with a harmless prank when he was sixteen.

Dazai doesn't answer even if he is slightly intrigued. He's getting close to finishing the proposal.

It's when Tachihara calls him for the third time that Dazai answers.

"What?" asks Dazai as a greeting, displeasure very evident.

"I need your help. I don't know what to do," says Tachihara, sounding distressed. Dazai is about to tell him to shove it when Tachihara adds, "It's Chuuya."

"Where are you?" asks Dazai immediately, tone deadly serious.

He hurries to the location Tachihara gives him, entering the bar with a great deal of unease. He sees why Tachihara had sounded so rattled right away.

Chuuya is standing on top of one of the tables, a bottle of wine in one hand that he's drinking straight from. His hair is wildly messy and he's wearing his shirt unbuttoned with the sleeves rolled up. The rest of his suit is tossed onto the floor along with his shoes. The hand that isn't holding the wine is clutching Chuuya's hat to his chest.

"This one," Chuuya calls out loudly, more intoxicated than Dazai had ever seen him, "is for Arthur fucking Rimbaud. One of the greatest men I've ever met." He raises the bottle of wine before taking a long drink. "A car took his life, while it refused to do the same to me. Because the world is a fucking nightmare that refuses to kill the things who truly deserve it."

At that, Dazai rushes forward from the frozen position he hadn't noticed he was in. He thankfully notes that they're the only people in the bar, which he suspects is due to Tachihara's intervention.

He ignores Tachihara's attempts at talking to him in favor of approaching Chuuya. Chuuya doesn't notice him until he's right in front of him.

"Osamu," he greets him, happy voice not matching the dead look in his eyes. "Have you come to toast with us? Mich, get us another bottle!"

"Chuuya," says Dazai sharply. He's furious about him using his name like that, but his concern outweighs that. "Stop making a fool of yourself and get down from there."

“What are you going to do if I don’t?” Chuuya leans down, above Dazai for once. He smiles with all his teeth. He seems to thrum with a violent energy, ready to snap.

Dazai snatches the bottle out of his hand and shoves it at Tachihara, who at least has the wits to hold onto it.

Chuuya lets out a cry, which gets louder as Dazai yanks on his leg so he falls forward off the table. Dazai stops him from crashing into the ground, wrapping an arm around his waist to hold him up. Chuuya struggles to get out of the hold, but Dazai doesn’t budge.

He looks over at Tachihara. “Pay the tab,” he directs. “Gather up his clothes and shoes. I’ve got this.” He doesn’t bother to see if Tachihara agrees or not before starting to drag Chuuya out of the bar.

The walk to Chuuya’s dorm is a constant battle with Chuuya fighting and insulting him the entire way. Dazai barely holds his temper in check as he tolerates petty taunts and Chuuya trying to kick him in the shins. He throws up for the first time just outside the dorm building, and after that he finally starts to protest less.

Dazai sets Chuuya on the ground in the kitchen once they get inside, walking to Chuuya’s bedroom to get him new clothes. He regrets his choice when he comes back to see Chuuya trying to open another bottle of wine.

Dazai tries to take it from him, and they struggle for a moment before Chuuya starts throwing up again all over both of them in what is possibly the most disgusting moment of Dazai’s life. It gets worse when in his shock Dazai drops the wine, the bottle breaking and spilling out onto the floor and their feet.

Dazai tries to deal with the mess on the floor while Chuuya leans over the sink. He seems to loose steam as he empties his stomach a third time, coughing and wiping his mouth with his sleeve.

Chuuya doesn’t resist this time when Dazai sets him on the ground. He stays quiet as Dazai hands him a glass of water. He looks at it blankly instead of drinking it.

Dazai goes to run water in the sink to try and rinse the puke down. The smell is driving him insane, but it’ll be hard to get rid of seeing as they’re both covered in vomit now.

Chuuya is still staring at his water as Dazai sits down across from him, letting out a quiet sigh. Now that he’s handled the basic tasks the alarm is settling in. He has no idea why this death has set Chuuya off like this. Dazai is struggling to keep his own panic at bay, knowing that it won’t help Chuuya right now.

Then something more disturbing than all the vomit happens, Chuuya starts *crying*. He doesn’t make a sound, but his body trembles as the tears stream down his face. The water in the glass he’s still holding sloshes back and forth with it.

Dazai has never seen Chuuya cry. Not once. Not about The Sheep, not after any of his nightmares, not about his past, not on the ten year anniversary of the accident, never. He’s

seen him scream and shout over how much he's hurting, he's seen him be quiet for hours on end in his misery, but his eyes had never so much had watered.

Dazai feels like he's the one that's going to be sick. He feels helpless, not prepared for what to do. He can't come up with anything to say.

"This is so fucking stupid," says Chuuya, voice wobbling, and it sounds so *wrong* on him. Chuuya has always been as tough as steel, never wavering. "I only met him once. I don't even-." Chuuya cuts off to sob audibly. "Why does this always fucking happen?"

Dazai would rather have Chuuya throw up on him one million times. He takes a slow breath, shifts to focusing on what he has the ability to change. He pries the glass of water out of Chuuya's hand gently and sets it off to the side. He stands up, grabbing Chuuya's hand to pull him to his feet.

"Let's get you cleaned up," says Dazai, brushing dirty red hair out of Chuuya's face with his other hand. Chuuya nods, crying silently again.

Chuuya stumbles a little on the way to the bathroom, but Dazai keeps him upright with his grip on his hand. It's so tight it's probably painful, but Chuuya squeezes back just as hard. Dazai turns the faucet on, the sound of running water deafening in the small room.

Chuuya strips off his shirt next to him. He uses it as a towel to mop up leftover spit and bile. Then he throws it in the bathroom trash can. He takes off his pants but leaves on his underwear as he climbs into the tub, sitting cross-legged and facing Dazai.

Dazai considers for a moment, then shucks off his clothes and bandages and gets in with his underwear on too. His skin stings a little from how quickly he pulls the bandages off, he's usually much slower and gentler.

He tries to shove down his self-consciousness about his scars being on display. It seems deeply irrelevant compared to his desire to help Chuuya. The water sloshes over the sides as he sits down in front of Chuuya, but neither of them do anything about it.

Dazai thinks Chuuya has stopped crying as Dazai washes his hair, but the water running over his face makes it hard to tell. He hadn't even realized he was humming until Chuuya comments on it.

"What song is that?" he asks, voice hoarse. Kouyou would be livid if she found out he was "abusing his instrument." His eyes look slightly more alive than when he'd seen him in the bar, but there's still far too much apathy in his gaze.

"Don't know," says Dazai, still running his hands through Chuuya's hair despite it being clean now. He should probably be disgusted to be sitting in Chuuya's puke water but he can't find it in himself to care. "Made it up."

"A Dazai original," says Chuuya. He smiles just slightly, and Dazai isn't sure why that makes him feel almost as terrible as when he was crying. "I like it."



*“Oh, songs of sky and ocean,”* sings Dazai softly instead of answering. *“I think I know the very essence of beauty. These waves a chorus upon the shore.”*

“Sounds nice in your voice,” murmurs Chuuya. He closes his eyes and leans his head forward until it’s resting on Dazai’s left shoulder. Dazai keeps singing the rest of the verse, his voice low and quiet, one hand stroking up and down Chuuya’s back gently while the other is buried in his hair like an anchor.

He doesn’t stop when he feels water against his skin coming from Chuuya, or when he reaches the end of the song, switching to something else. Dazai doesn’t put much thought into the music, just keeps picking things he thinks Chuuya would like, artists he’s mentioned, posters he’s seen on his wall. He keeps singing long after the water has gone cold and their skin is pruned.

Eventually Chuuya pulls away and Dazai stops his endless stream of songs. His throat sort of hurts, but Chuuya’s probably does too from all the puking. Chuuya rubs a hand over his eyes roughly. When he looks at Dazai it finally feels like he’s looking at the boy he knows again, blue eyes exhausted but at least there’s something in them.

“Stand up,” says Chuuya, using the side of the tub to get to his feet. His voice is still strained. He doesn’t wobble at all as he moves though. “Let’s drain this nasty water.”

Dazai gets up and they’re both quiet as they let the bath empty. Chuuya reaches behind Dazai to turn on the showerhead, and the cold water makes him shiver. He gets goosebumps on his limbs as they both use Chuuya’s body wash to quickly scrub themselves clean.

Chuuya gets out of the shower first, leaving Dazai behind standing in the icy water. Dazai lets it run over him for a few moments longer, taking a couple deep breaths. He has no idea what time it is, it feels like it’s been hours since he went to pick up Chuuya, but in reality it might have been much shorter. But stalling isn’t going to make things any better.

He turns off the water and steps onto the towel Chuuya had thrown onto the bathroom floor. There’s puddles all over because they hadn’t pulled the shower curtain closed. Chuuya had left another towel sitting on the sink for Dazai. He uses it to dry himself off, underwear uncomfortably sticking to his legs now.

He debates what to do about it when Chuuya comes back into the room, holding a new pair, sweatpants, and a grey t-shirt. He shoves them into Dazai’s chest. He’s put on fresh clothes himself, toweling off his wet hair before throwing that towel into the wet mess on the floor.

Chuuya leaves the room again and Dazai quickly changes. He expects the clothes to be too small, but they fit him just fine. The pants are almost too long. Clearly Chuuya hadn’t bought them for himself. He fights down the thought to go find Chuuya.

Dazai leaves the bathroom and starts to go towards the bedroom before hearing noises coming from the kitchen. He changes course and finds Chuuya making two cups of tea. He must have stood under the water longer than he thought to give Chuuya the time to boil the water.

Chuuya pushes one of the mugs towards him and grabs the other for himself, taking a large sip of the boiling hot tea immediately.

Dazai has no interest in drinking it, but he holds onto the other mug to warm his hands at least. He waits for Chuuya to be the one to say something. He doesn't want to push him to talk if he doesn't want to.

"Arthur did that too, you know," says Chuuya eventually, a pained smile on his face. "Used tea as a hand warmer."

"I remember you met with him during Kouyou's tour," says Dazai, setting down his untouched mug. He leans against the counter, keeping his eyes on Chuuya. "I wasn't aware you had kept in touch though, or that you were so close."

Chuuya takes another long sip of his tea. "We only met in person the one time." Chuuya talks into his mug rather than looking at Dazai. "He arranged the meeting. He knew my mom."

Dazai bites his lip to keep from frowning. He's angry with himself for not even noticing Chuuya's connection with the other man. If Tachihara hadn't called him he never would have even known.

"He knew what had happened to me," says Chuuya, choosing his words carefully. "He...he told me not to let my mom's problems ruin my own life. He encouraged me to be my own person, to not let my past define me. He told me my father was dead."

"Did you know that?" Dazai tries to take all this new information in calmly. It's a little hard though.

Chuuya ignores the question. "I was a dick to him. I insulted him, told him to fuck off. He didn't seem to mind. He just wanted me to be happy."

Dazai stays quiet, knowing Chuuya isn't finished talking. He's not sure if it's better or worse that Chuuya won't look directly at him.

"But then last year in May, he reached out on the anniversary of what had happened and we slowly started talking," says Chuuya, voice a little less steady now. "I talked to him a lot when I was on tour this year. He was always pretty quiet, but he was also supportive. I..." Chuuya trails off, clearing his throat.

"I loved him," says Chuuya, voice much quieter. "I loved him, and he's dead. It's stupid to think that it's connected to me. That every time I get close to someone, something always happens to ruin it. I didn't even know him that well, I'm sure others are mourning his death who were much closer to him."

"It's not your fault," says Dazai anyway. Chuuya rolls his eyes, but his shoulders seem slightly less rigid, so Dazai counts it as a win.

"He'd hate this shit show." Chuuya drains the rest of his tea and sets the mug on the counter roughly. He leans against the counter next to Dazai, just far enough away they don't touch.

“I think he’d give you a free pass.” Dazai looks down at him, sees his eyes closed in either thought or exhaustion. He makes them open by leaning over and nudging their shoulders together.

“I swear you’re like fifty different fucking people in one body,” says Chuuya, snorting slightly. He shoves Dazai away and stands up fully. His eyes widen as he properly looks at Dazai. “You’re not wearing your bandages.”

“Your powers of observation never cease to amaze me, chibi.” Dazai resists the urge to cover his arms, feeling more naked now than he had in the bath. Chuuya’s gaze doesn’t linger long though, his eyes deliberately pointed elsewhere.

“Oh, fuck off, I’m not even fully sober,” says Chuuya, moving to open the drawer next to the sink. He rummages through it then picks out something and throws it at Dazai.

Dazai catches the roll of bandages against his chest. He almost drops them when he realizes it’s the brand that he normally uses.

His hands tremble a little. Anyone else would have asked, anyone else would have more than glanced at the scars running down his arms. But not Chuuya, who even in the depths of grief still treats Dazai with such terrible gentleness and kindness.

“I’m going to sleep. Or I’m going to try to anyway,” says Chuuya, before he can say anything about it. Chuuya doesn’t wait for him to answer before walking towards the bedroom.

Dazai takes the roll of bandages and goes into the bathroom. He avoids looking at the mess they’ve left, quickly taking off his clothes so he can wrap himself up. The motions are easy after enough practice, but he rushes through them. Once he’s done he goes back to the kitchen and puts the roll back in the drawer it came from.

He approaches the bedroom hesitantly, unsure of what Chuuya wants. It’s dark in the room, but Chuuya’s breathing indicates he’s still awake. He stays quiet as Dazai moves towards the bed. But then he shifts over a little, making just a tiny amount of room on the twin bed and Dazai gets his answer.

Dazai climbs into the bed that’s much too small for two people carefully, arranging himself around Chuuya as delicately as he can. He puts his left leg and arm over the smaller boy’s body, squishing them together. Chuuya grunts a little but adjusts so it’s somewhat comfortable. Chuuya turns slightly away from him, and Dazai ends up facing the back of his neck on the pillow.

Sleeping next to Chuuya always feels familiar despite how infrequently he gets to do it. It’s warmer than usual right now with how tightly they have to be pressed together to fit on the bed. Dazai is too exhausted after everything tonight to stay awake for long, slipping into sleep almost immediately after he closes his eyes

When Dazai wakes up, he’s surprised the bed is empty. He can count on one hand the number of times Chuuya has gotten up before him. Dazai has always been a light sleeper, and could manage on hours here and there if he had too.

The clothes Chuuya slept in are laying on the floor in a pile, which means he had been up for a while. Dazai gets out of bed, walking into the living room. He finds Chuuya standing near a suitcase, dressed in casual clothes, holding his hat in his hands.

“I’m going to Japan,” announces Chuuya as soon as Dazai walks in the room.

“Now?” asks Dazai, caught off guard by the sudden decision.

“Yes, now,” says Chuuya. He seems agitated. “I’m going to pay my respects or whatever.”

“And you cleared this with Mori?” Chuuya usually isn’t someone who goes against orders.

“Yeah, I don’t really give a shit what Mori thinks,” says Chuuya, something close to a sneer on his face.

Under different circumstances, hearing those words come out of Chuuya’s mouth would be like a fantasy (in fact, he’s actually had several that start out that way), but right now they’re attached to too many unpleasant emotions to be satisfying.

The invitation is clear without him having to say anything, it’s written all over Chuuya’s face, *come with me*.

Dazai wishes that he could. But he can’t, not when he’s so close to finally putting the pieces in place to lead to the return of Double Black.

He’s never broached the subject with Chuuya before. Dazai has his reasons for not bringing it up. Chuuya didn’t need to know, he had no power over the outcome. Mori would be more suspicious if Chuuya started acting strangely.

But those are all paltry excuses he uses to hide the real reason. The truth is that he can’t forget the look on Chuuya’s face when he’d accused him of not caring about them being split up last September. Dazai wants to be the one responsible for them being allowed to record together again, to prove to Chuuya how much their partnership means to him.

He can’t sacrifice all the progress he’s made now when the end goal is so close. Dazai could either have a couple days helping out Chuuya if he went off to Japan with him now, or if he’s a little more patient he can really be with Chuuya for weeks, months, even longer.

Dazai is still trying to figure out how to phrase any of that, so he says as a way to stall, “Well, have some mitarashi dango for me.”

He isn’t prepared for the way Chuuya recoils at the words, for the absolutely enraged look he gives him after he gets over his surprise.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Chuuya demands, practically spitting the words.

“Chuuya, wait,” says Dazai, trying to keep his voice calm. It’s hard when he feels this level of panic. “Just let me explain.”

“You’re unbelievable,” says Chuuya, and the hostility in the words stuns Dazai.

He's barely started to recover when Chuuya grabs his suitcase and makes for the door, his expression deadly furious.

"Wait," says Dazai again, except this time it's not calm at all. He's practically begging. "Please. Just let me-."

"Fuck you," says Chuuya, cutting him off loudly, eyes burning with rage. He opens the door and storms out so quickly Dazai doesn't get a chance to say anything else. Chuuya slams the door behind him, the sound thunderous in the tiny dorm.

Dazai is left staring at the door, throat dry and heart racing. By the time he gets to opening it again, Chuuya is nowhere to be seen.

He tries calling Chuuya, but the calls go straight to voicemail. He spends half the day trying to track him down, ignoring all the calls and messages he gets from work.

But eventually he has no choice but to go to PMR, no matter how worried about Chuuya he is. Dazai could never get away with missing an executive meeting.

Dazai is certain he looks severely disheveled as he walks into the room, but no one comments on it. Kouyou gives him a concerned look, but he ignores her, keeping his gaze fixed on the table.

"We're all deeply saddened about the news of the death of Arthur Rimbaud," says Mori to start the meeting. "It's a huge blow for Port Mafia Records. He led the Southeast Asian division with a steady hand for many years."

"He was a good man," says Kinoshita solemnly. "I greatly enjoyed working with him. He will be missed."

"He will indeed," says Mori with a nod. Dazai can't even bring himself to care about Mori's insincere show of grief.

"Do you know who will take his place yet?" asks Kinoshita. His grief seems real. His serious face is even more grave than usual.

"I don't know about a permanent solution," says Mori. "But Chuuya Nakahara will take over in the interim."

It's actually unclear who looks the most surprised: himself, Kouyou, or Kinoshita.

“That young singer?” asks Kinoshita, the first to be able to speak up. “Does he have any experience in management?”

“He doesn’t,” says Mori, crossing his arms. “But he’s got very good instincts when it comes to music. I trust him to keep things together while we search for someone else to take over the position.”

“And Chuuya was okay with this?” asks Kouyou, tone slightly icy. Her protectiveness of Chuuya hasn’t diminished at all from the way she’s almost glaring at Mori.

“He was,” confirms Mori. “He was already planning to go to Japan. He called me from the plane.”

Kouyou blinks. “Why would he be going to Japan?”

“He wanted to pay his respects to Arthur,” explains Mori matter of factly. “The man meant a lot to Chuuya. You know how private Chuuya is, but he was somewhat like a father to him.”

Dazai’s nails are digging into his fists under the table. There is a distinct possibility he might throw up.

“He told you this?” asks Kouyou, clearly not pleased Chuuya would confide in Mori instead of her.

“He didn’t have to,” says Mori, shaking his head. “Rimbaud’s the one who gave him that hat he’s always wearing.”

Every time Dazai thinks he can’t possibly feel worse, another horrendous statement comes out of Mori’s mouth. It’s excruciating to pretend he’s not falling apart. But Dazai somehow manages it.

“With Chuuya gone, we’re making some personnel changes to The Black Lizards,” announces Mori. “Motojiro Kajii will be stepping down as well. Instead we’ll have Ryuunosuke Akutagawa take over as vocals and guitar.”

Dazai stares at Mori for a moment incredulously. “I thought we were developing Akutagawa as a solo artist.”

“It’s clear by now that the boy just isn’t ready for that, vocally or emotionally,” says Mori, and the smugness to the statement makes things sting ever worse. But Mori’s next sentence is the nail in the coffin. “It was actually Chuuya’s suggestion to rearrange the band this way.”

Dazai laughs, a bit hysterically actually. Because well, the other options are sobbing or screaming.

“Are you alright Dazai?” asks Mori, frowning at him. Everyone is staring at him.

It had been useless. Everything he had done for over a year had been utterly useless. He’d let Chuuya go for *nothing*. Dazai’s stupidity is too great to even be measured.

“I’m great,” says Dazai, still laughing a little. He smiles brightly. “I think it’s a brilliant idea. Chuuya is right, as per usual.”

The look Kouyou is giving him is even more concerned than when he’d entered the room. But then Mori catches her attention.

“Kouyou, how are things proceeding with Mimic Industries?” asks Mori, shifting the meeting back to business.

“They’ve been receptive to our offer,” says Kouyou. “I’ve set a meeting with André Gide for next month.

“Run everything through Ango,” instructs Mori. “He’ll know what to do.”

Dazai doesn’t even bother paying attention to the rest of the meeting. His mind feels broken. He doesn’t have the energy to care about Mori’s latest ploys, not right now.

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### **January 10, Nearly Two Years Since the Release of Corruption**

“You look like shit.”

The voice causes Dazai to look up sharply, barely believing his ears. But it is Chuuya, leaning against the door of his office with his arms crossed. He’s frowning, watching Dazai carefully.

Dazai wishes he could return the sentiment. Chuuya’s time abroad has agreed with him. His hair is longer, down to his shoulders now, the edges starting to curl a little. Chuuya has exchanged his older simple suits for a different style. He wore a white shirt with a dark vest and a black bolo tie over it, a black coat hanging around his shoulders lined with a pale red. His hands are covered in a pair of black gloves.

The only things that look the same about him are his choker, which he’d had before Dazai even met him, and his hat, which Dazai had always thought was ridiculous, but now the sight of it makes him want to snap the pen he’s holding in half.

Dazai doesn’t doubt that his own appearance is probably slightly haggard. It’s been hard to care about anything these past few months.

He’s basically just going through the motions. Everything at work feels meaningless now. Dazai doesn’t even touch anything related to music. He’d given up on working with Q, telling Mori the child was too unstable to put in the spotlight.

In the beginning he’d called Chuuya over and over again. He’d left countless voicemails, ranging from deeply apologetic to shouting at him for his continued silent treatment. Chuuya hadn’t responded to a single one.

The only time he’d answered Dazai was when Dazai had sent him an email saying he had a work question, he wanted to know the message Chuuya wanted to put out about him leaving The Black Lizards.

All Chuuya had said in his reply is **Chuuya Nakahara is stepping away from music due to a personal matter. He would appreciate privacy at this time.**

Dazai has stared at those two sentences more than once, his lengthy list of regrets threatening to overwhelm him.

As opposed to his own dismal performance, Chuuya had flourished while he was away. He'd taken up his new position with confidence. The Southeast Asian office hadn't known what to think of him when he'd first started, but now they seemed to be in no rush to find someone to take over for Chuuya. As always, Chuuya is easily loved everywhere he goes.

Dazai remembers Ace reporting the numbers back in December, surprising everyone that instead of being in the red after the death of their longstanding boss the Southeast Asian office had broken even. Mori's face had lit up, and even Kinoshita had looked impressed.

Dazai himself had kept his face blank until he could get to The Lupin and scrape off some of the masks he puts on to be marginally himself at least.

The only joy he feels these days is there, sharing a drink with Ango and Odasaku. Their support has been unwavering. Although they know better than to ask him about his dark moods now after he'd shut down the questions so forcefully the first times.

Over time his remorse towards Chuuya has twisted into more than a little resentment. Dazai had fucked up one time, and Chuuya had cut him off completely. He'd acted like the years Dazai had spent doing everything in his power to stand by him were nothing. He'd thrown Dazai away without a second thought.

He'd stop calling eventually, seeing it as pointless. Chuuya hadn't reacted to that either, and Dazai's resentment had only grown. It feels like Chuuya had burned everything between them when he'd left, only leaving the scattered ashes for Dazai to deal with.

Instead of being pleased to see Chuuya, he's more on edge than ever.

"What are you doing here?" asks Dazai, and the cold tone it comes out in isn't even an act.

"Flew in for Kouyou's birthday," answers Chuuya, his own voice a little cold as well.

They just stare at each other for a moment. The tension in the room is practically palpable.

"Is that really all you're going to say?" asks Chuuya, standing up fully. The question is filled to the brim with malice.

"I had many things to say to you, in the plethora of voicemails and messages I left you," says Dazai, tone not changing at all. He rolls his eyes. "You didn't respond to a single one."

"I should have known this was a fucking waste of time," declares Chuuya, shaking his head. He turns around and storms out of the office, pulling the door shut behind him violently.

This time Dazai doesn't chase after him.



Executive meetings are the worst parts of his days, which is saying something when his days are overflowing with vacuous scum.

But Dazai is here as always, smile in place. Not even the turmoil of seeing Chuuya yesterday changes that.

He's surprised when Mori starts the meeting before they've all arrived, Kinoshita's chair still left empty.

"I've got news," says Mori, voice even more violently cheerful than usual. "After a number of years of excellent work, Mokutaro Kinoshita has decided to step down from his position to return to the field of medicine."

Dazai can barely muster up any surprise, though Ace looks very caught off guard. Kouyou is smiling, which makes more sense with the next announcement.

"Chuuya Nakahara will be taking his place as the fifth executive of Port Mafia Records," says Mori. "After his success in Japan, I know he'll be able to pick up where Kinoshita left off easily."

Dazai's smile becomes strained. It turns out he is going to be working with Chuuya again, in a vastly different context that he'd imagined. The thought of having to be in the same room as him during this executive meetings is daunting. Though if he follows Kinoshita's pattern he'll rarely be in L.A, instead he'll be out of the country more often than not.

"An excellent choice," says Kouyou, voice full of pride.

"Indeed," agrees Mori. He flips back to his business tone next though. "I've tasked him with setting up a PMR office in Europe. We've put it off long enough, and Kinoshita had recommended it as he left. How is the matter with Mimic progressing?"

"We're on schedule," says Kouyou, shifting into a more professional persona as well.

"Good," praises Mori. "And on your end Ace?"

"We're all set," says Ace, making it come out as bragging as usual. "Should be good to go in February."

"Excellent," says Mori, a sharp smile in place.

Dazai holds back an eye roll. Mimic Industries has a few middling performers, but they were much more well known in the music industry for selling drugs than they were for selling

music. Even Port Mafia Records held a better reputation. It figures Mori would want to partner with them.

Dazai leaves the meeting more weary than ever, walking towards his office when Kouyou stops him.

“So you didn’t take the offer?” she asks, looking at him with a perplexing amount of disappointment.

“What offer?” asks Dazai shortly. He isn’t aware of any sort of offer that he’d turned down.

“When Mori gave Chuuya his promotion, Chuuya had said he was tired of doing only office work,” says Kouyou, disappointment changing to something else. Dazai rarely sees her look this openly sad. “He said he’d go to Europe if Mori allowed him to start working on another album, a Double Black album. I’m not sure how, but he got Mori to agree to it. Chuuya said he’d talk to you about it once he saw you in person.”

Against his better judgement, Dazai had held on to a small amount of hope that he and Chuuya would be able to fix things. But now that hope dies savagely, and Dazai feels himself fracture as it does.

“I have things I can’t leave here,” says Dazai, but it sounds hollow to his own ears.

“I used to think it would make me happy,” says Kouyou softly. “Watching the two of you grow apart.”

“Things rarely live up to our expectations,” says Dazai, his voice coming out as if it was someone else speaking. He walks away before Kouyou can say anything else.

Dazai somehow makes it through the rest of the day. He’s not sure how, he feels like his body is on autopilot without his mind having any input. The only active thing he does is text Ango and Odasaku to meet him at The Lupin later.

“Three shots of tequila, please,” says Dazai as he strolls into the bar that night, holding up three fingers cheerily. Ango and Odasaku are already there, and they look up as he comes in.

The bartender doesn’t hesitate before pouring the alcohol even though Dazai has never ordered anything other than whiskey before.

“Dazai, we are not going to do-,” starts Ango before Dazai grabs the shots and takes them all one by one.

“Is this about Nakahara’s promotion?” asks Ango, as in the know as usual.

“I couldn’t care less about the slug’s title,” says Dazai with a huge smile. He signals to the bartender that he’ll take a glass of whiskey now. “He was practically an executive anyway. He had all the power of one. Nothing’s changed there.”

“Then what’s wrong, Dazai?” asks Oda, looking at him with obvious worry.

“Come on, everyone, we’re toasting,” says Dazai, ignoring him and holding up his glass. “To the death of Double Black. It was a long slow death, took over a year actually, but it’s finally kicked the bucket at last.”

Dazai grins at Ango and Oda’s concerned looks. “This is a celebration. Don’t look so morose! I’m finally free of that tiny nuisance. It’s a relief, a miracle. Songs will be written about this moment.”

“Drink,” says Dazai, and he’s not even really sure if it’s a plea or a demand. He feels like someone has peeled his heart out of his chest, one agonizing strip at a time.

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## **February, Two Years and Half a Month Since the Release of Corruption**

Dazai doesn’t usually visit Oda at work, but right now he’s too troubled to wait to see him later. His pace is faster than usual as he makes his way to the shipping department. He reaches Oda’s cubicle quickly and is grateful that there isn’t anyone else around.

“Dazai,” says Oda when he sees him, a smile on his face. He turns in his chair to face him. “What are you doing here?”

“You’ve heard that PMR has entered a deal with Mimic Industries, right?” asks Dazai, coming to stand closer. “That we’re handling some of their shipping domestically in order to use their connections in Europe?”

“Sure,” says Oda. “Though all they told us was that we had a new job coming in.”

“You should stay away from it,” warns Dazai, scowling slightly. He’s more angry at himself for not paying close enough attention to the agreement until now. It hadn’t seemed relevant at the time.

“Dazai, I don’t pick and choose what jobs I get put on,” says Oda, laughing a bit.

“You should make an exception,” says Dazai. His tone is completely serious. “Mimic Industries is one of the biggest suppliers of heroin in the music industry.

Oda’s face shifts to a less pleasant expression. “I’ve been clean for a long time, Dazai. I know how to handle myself.”

“Why even take the risk?” asks Dazai, snapping a bit.

“I need this job,” says Oda flatly. “You know that.”

“I could get you a different job,” says Dazai, angry in a way he never has been with Oda before. “Pick any other record company, and I can make it happen. Or Ango could get you a job in a different industry, one less full of vulgar people.”

“I’m not going to take any handouts,” says Oda. His voice is also uncharacteristically angry. His eyes are hard as they look at Dazai.

“So you’d rather hang onto your stupid pride than let one of your friends help you?” demands Dazai, raising his voice a bit.

“I’ve got to get back to work, Dazai,” says Oda shortly. He stands up, brushing past Dazai as he goes.

Dazai watches him go, resolving to try again later, once they’ve both calmed down. He’ll start to put out feelers to look for a job that would suit Odasaku better, maybe something working with kids. Dazai isn’t going to let him rot away in PMR, he’s not letting this company destroy one of the only things he has left.

Looking back, it all seems so glaringly obvious. Mori had never intended to work with Mimic Industries, it had all been a set up. He’d made a deal with the police to raid the shipping department once they’d brought their product into PMR. And if they found any of the drugs PMR had been selling, they would assume they belonged to Mimic.

It was a win-win. They got to take out some of the competition while also getting a favor from the law enforcement department.

And the one to broker the deal had been Ango Sakaguchi, the undercover cop who had been working for Port Mafia Records for years. He’d been assigned to gather dirt on Mori, but he hadn’t been able to pass up the opportunity to catch the bigger fish when Mimic had entered the picture.

There’s only one tiny detail keeping Dazai from being impressed, and it’s the fact that the raid had been prompted by the overdose of one of the workers in Port Mafia Records’ shipping department.

Mori knows the type of people Ace employees, he’d probably counted on one of them being unable to resist themselves in order to spring the trap. Mori wouldn’t care about the loss of some grunt when he had this much to gain.

If it had been anyone other than Odasaku, Dazai probably wouldn’t have cared either.

Dazai hates hospitals. They were an odd combination of too quiet or when they were loud, it was because something terrible was happening. He hadn't stepped foot in one in years, but he forces himself to in order to see Oda.

Oda looks pale, lying in the hospital bed. He sits up slightly when he sees Dazai come in, wincing as it pulls on his IV line.

Dazai takes a seat in one of the chairs, pulling it over so it's next to the bed.

He doesn't know what to say. His words don't seem to be worth anything. He constantly manipulates everyone around him with them, but when it comes to actually helping the people he cares about, he fails every time.

"Dazai, don't cry," says Oda, voice a little hoarse.

"I'm not," says Dazai, tears clearly running down his face. "What is there to cry about?"

"This wasn't your fault," says Oda. He reaches over to grab one of Dazai's hands, but his grip is loose with how little strength he has. "It's mine."

"Anything I don't want to lose ends up lost," says Dazai, voice devoid of emotion. "The moment I get it, it's instantly gone."

"I'm going to be fine," says Oda, but his heart isn't in it. "They've already signed me up for a treatment center."

"You're going to lose the kids," says Dazai. He barely feels a flicker of guilt when Oda winces.

"You know what I thought the first time we met?" asks Oda, recovering and fixing Dazai with a determined look.

"What?" Dazai looks back, face still wet with tears that he doesn't bother to wipe away.

"I thought that kid looks lonely," says Oda, squeezing his hand. He doesn't look deterred when Dazai doesn't react. "Can I give you some advice?"

"Sure, why not?" asks Dazai blankly.

"I know that you don't really care about Port Mafia Records," says Oda, voice surprisingly strong now. "You never have. You've only ever cared about the music because it helps you feel alive." Oda speaks the words with confidence, his eyes never leaving Dazai's. "But you're never going to be able to fill that hole inside of you working for somewhere like PMR. If you're going to make music, you should work for a place that cares about people, that makes music just for the sake of it, not as part of some devious power play. You could make music that helps people. I think it would make you happier."

"What makes you say that?" asks Dazai, a fresh set of tears flowing now. Happiness isn't an emotion he feels all the often, or for very long when he does.

"I know you better than anyone, Dazai," says Oda kindly. "I'm your friend."

Oda continues to hold Dazai's hand as he cries, not bothered by the sniffing and labored breathing. Eventually he pulls himself together again, drying off his face with his suit jacket.

Oda looks a lot less happy when he speaks up again. "I'm not going to be able to see you for a while. It's part of my recovery. I can't be around anything that reminds me of what happened, or having to do with music."

"Oh," says Dazai, pulling his hand back. He's too strung out to say anything else.

"It's not personal," says Oda quickly. "Or permanent. We'll always be friends."

Dazai gives him a smile, figuring he owes him that much. He keeps his doubts to himself. "Sure thing, Odasaku. I'll let you get some rest."

Oda gives him a small wave as he goes, clearly a little hesitant to let him leave but too exhausted to fight him.

Dazai is stopped in the hallway though by someone asking, "You're Osamu Dazai, right?"

"Unfortunately," says Dazai. He looks at the man who'd spoken. He's bald, with glasses and a goatee. He's wearing a dress shirt with no tie, and leaning against the wall, looking Dazai up and down.

"My name is Santoka Taneda," says the man. "I work with Ango Sakaguchi."

Dazai scowls at the name. While he had expected this type of behavior from Mori, Ango's role in the whole thing had been a shock. Dazai's not sure if he's more angry about that or that he'd been lying to their faces every day in that bar, pretending to be their friends.

But Dazai had underestimated Ango, and Ango had underestimated Mori, and Odasaku had been the one to pay the price. Dazai could go the rest of his life without speaking to Ango again.

"Give him my worst," says Dazai, flashing a smirk.

"He's tearing himself apart about it," says Taneda, not put off at all. "He didn't mean for anyone to get hurt. He's so guilty he won't step foot in this place."

*He should be,* thinks Dazai to himself. He's not sure what this Taneda guy wants from him, but Dazai would really like to get out of here.

"He turned down a promotion in the department," continues Taneda, "Something he'd been working towards for years. Instead he's taken a job in narcotics."

It makes Dazai soften a minuscule amount. "Why are you telling me all of this?"

"Because I know he won't say it to you himself," says Taneda, shaking his head. "But that's not the only reason I've sought you out. Rumor has it that you're looking to get out of Port

Mafia Records. I happen to be friends with a man who runs his own small label, the Audio Detective Agency. I know Fukuzawa would be happy to have you.”

Dazai has possibly heard about the ADA in passing before, but he knows very little about them. He thinks over the offer. Really, what was left tying him to PMR? Chuuya? The thought is laughable. He wants nothing to do with Dazai. And with Oda gone and Ango a traitor, he can't come up with a single thing.

“I signed a four year recording contract when I was sixteen,” says Dazai eventually. Hope feels slightly dangerous right now, but Odasaku's words are still ringing in his head.

“So you've got two years left to go,” says Taneda, face contemplative. “Well, we'll figure it out. In the meantime, you could stay with me. I've got a spare room.”

“Do you think I can music that helps people there?” asks Dazai enthusiastically, smiling genuinely for what feels like the first time in ages.

Chuuya may have been a little quick to take on the job in France. A little over a year of getting partially through some books on French and listening to French music had not left him an expert in the language. It had been a lot easier in Japan when he hadn't had to worry about being understood.

He's also completely fucking miserable for reasons that have nothing to do with work and everything to do with Dazai. Just the thought of the other boy makes his teeth clench.

His fury is starting to waver though. He's starting to recognize that he'd let his grief about Arthur cloud his judgement. Losing him had been like a nightmare while being awake. Chuuya hadn't really listened to music for months, losing himself in paperwork and administration.

He'd felt inhuman in his despair, and because of that he'd pushed Dazai away. Dazai hadn't helped by being so standoffish, but Chuuya knows a lot of the blame lies with himself.

Chuuya had made an attempt to patch things up with him in January, even going so far as to bargain with Mori to make him agree to let them do another album together. Chuuya had played him the old parts he had completed of *Arahabaki* to prove to him that their second album would be worth taking a chance on.

But then when he'd seen Dazai in person and Dazai had reacted so coldly, Chuuya's anger had spiked again. He'd torn out of the room without telling Dazai anything, too explosive to try and make amends.

Revisiting *Arahabaki* had played a big part in his mental state back then. He'd felt the lyrics under his skin, acting like he had no other function than to destroy. The nightmares had never

been this bad before.

Now that it's been this long, Chuuya is starting to come back to himself a little. He wants to find a way to apologize to Dazai, to really *talk* this time instead of just flinging whatever will cut the deepest at each other.

Chuuya knows that Dazai isn't going to be the one to break the cycle. It's going to be up to him. Neither of them are very good at admitting when they're wrong. The thought of doing it now is still discouraging.

But Chuuya knows that his pride isn't as important as Dazai is. He loves him, as a friend, as a partner, as more. He doesn't want to lose him. So he'll wave the fucking white flag.

It's hard to do that from a different continent though. Chuuya is still trying to figure out the best way to speak to him, if he needs to go back to L.A. and lock them both in a room until they have an actual conversation.

Chuuya's phone ringing surprises him, mostly because of the name on display. Mori doesn't usually call him often, especially when it's the middle of the night in L.A.

"Hello?" says Chuuya as he picks up.

"Have you heard from Dazai at all?" asks Mori, voice carefully blank.

"Not recently," says Chuuya, frowning a little. "Why?"

"It appears he's left Port Mafia Records," says Mori. Chuuya has trouble comprehending the words. "He hasn't come into the office and his apartment has been cleared out. He also hasn't answered any attempts to contact him."

"He what?" asks Chuuya, still not believing his ears.

"He wouldn't do that," says Chuuya quickly, trying to keep a steady grip on the phone. "He wouldn't have left without saying something."

"Don't worry about it, Chuuya," says Mori, his usual cheery tone back in full force. "It was a long shot that he'd reached out to you. I know you two are more foes than friends these days. Sorry to bother you."

"It's fine," says Chuuya numbly.

Chuuya hangs up and stares at the phone in his hand for a minute. Then he chucks it as hard as he can at the wall, shattering it into pieces. But it isn't enough. So he grabs his computer and slams it into the ground too. His desk is next, flung onto its side as he lets out an angry scream, realizing he'd been shouting since he'd thrown the phone.

He can't breathe. He can't fucking breathe.

*Nothing's going to change*, whispers Dazai in his memory. And Chuuya has always known he's a fucking liar, but it's never cut this deeply before.



He digs the heels of his hands into his eyes as forcefully as he can. He will not cry over this, *he will not.*

*The creature was destruction incarnate, it lived to consume whatever was put in front of it. They called it Arahabaki, says his mom, voice still clear despite how many years it's been, Don't you think it sounds a lot like you?*

And then a different set of memories, but they ache in a different way. *Whatever we are, we're the same,* said so earnestly Chuuya had stupidly believed it. His own foolish self, *That's what being Soukoku means right? I can get through anything as long as you're there.*

*We should be a duo, solo artists are overrated anyway,* a suggestion said so matter of fact, no hesitation, as if it were the obvious course of action.

Then much further back, a dark haired boy with a sharp smile, *Chuuya Nakahara, I'm Dazai. I look forward to working with you.*

He will not cry but he can't stop the trembling of his hands, the shakiness of his breath, the way his whole body is shuddering.

The smell of salt in the air is what makes him pause eventually, mostly because it takes him a moment to realize where it's coming from. It's the fucking Petrus he'd stupidly brought with him, and in his rampage it had fallen over and shattered on the ground.

Chuuya looks at the stale ocean water, blinking at it. He takes a deep breath. Then he adjusts his suit jacket on his shoulders, striding out of the room (maybe those lessons in gravitas hadn't been useless after all.)

Simone, the woman who works at the front desk, looks up as he walks over. Chuuya has no doubt she heard everything from out here, it's clear from the look on her face.

"Hey, Simone," says Chuuya casually. "I'm going to need a new phone. And a new computer. Most likely a new desk as well."

"Of course, Mr. Nakahara," says Simone, bewildered but trying not to show it.

"I'm taking off for the day," says Chuuya, walking towards the exit. "I'll see you tomorrow."

The next morning Chuuya uses his new phone to send two texts quickly. He's said the words a thousand times, usually never meaning them. But he's completely serious this time. Chuuya is sure he's not going to get a reply, but that doesn't stop him from the need to make himself clear.

Dazai should probably get a new phone, even though he's pretty sure he's removed any way anyone PMR would be able to track him from it. He justifies it by not wanting to delete all the progress he's made on all of the games he plays on it. It's very crucial now as he spends a lot of time laying in Taneda's guest room and playing on his phone.

He's gotten an influx of calls and texts from various Port Mafia Records employees, but the ones he's been anticipating finally arrive late at night a few days after he's left.

**[11:05pm Slug]: I fucking hate you.**

**[11:05pm Slug]: You are dead to me. Never speak to me again**

## Chapter End Notes

the alternative (spoilery) title for this chapter: The Death of Double Black

### CATCH YOUR REAL LIFE FACTS/INSPO HERE

- Mokutaro Kinoshita: real life author and doctor who was friends with Mori! also discovered the Nevus of Ota, a hyperpigmentation of the face, usually in the eye
- Kotaro Takamura: poet who published in Mori's literary magazine, Chieko's Sky is the name of poem collection
- Naoya Shiga: wrote A Dark Night's Passing, and real life Dazai was strongly critical of his writing
- Lemon Bomb is inspired by real life Kajii's famous work Lemon (i got it stuck in my head way too often after writing it)
- Tachihara's crew consisted of Jane Austen, The Bronte sisters, and Charles Dickens
- I am blatantly ignoring how the Grammys work for my own purposes, although noms do go out in December with the show in January some years
- "Ah, songs of sky and ocean, I think I know the very essence of beauty" - Chuuya Nakahara, Exhaustion
- Simone is there for two seconds but named for Simone de Beauvoir

The beginning of this chapter: take some fluff with a little bit of angst sprinkled in  
The rest: ANGST ANGST ANGST ANGST

This chapter was like my own personal meat grinder. HANG THIS SHIT ON MY GRAVESTONE

I LET ODASAKU LIVE BITCH (i can't name a single person who is happier with the situation) i almost put that in the tags but kept it as a surprise

catch me crying about Mori making 14 year old Dazai sad by tricking him into thinking he was giving him a record deal but just using him.....actually just catch me crying about this entire chapter

everyone last chapter: omg why would Dazai leave PMR  
me, sobbing: ah you see it was a series of very ill timed personal tragedies, deep seated  
insecurities, and Horrific miscommunications!!

(but actually having to tear apart their relationship after building it up for so long  
BURNT)

I AM STILL DESPERATE TO KNOW WHAT YOU THOUGHT IN A COMMENT.  
(plz i gave you 43k and my tears)

# Three Cheers For Four Years

## Chapter Summary

in which some things change and others stay the same

title adjusted from the Mayday Parade song Three Cheers for Five Years

## Chapter Notes

IT WASN'T EVEN A FULL MONTH THIS TIME Y'ALL (i'm aware the bar is on the floor)

as always, i am astounded and humbled by the support this fic gets. it has been amazing.

fuck me and my timeline, i had to go back and make two SMALL adjustments to previous chapters (about how long Dazai had known Atsushi and how many times Dazai had interacted with Chuuya in the past year), nothing has really changed though

me: ES, you aren't going be able to attract new readers if you keep putting out these insanely long chapter

also me: 54k baby

while last chapter was focused more on dazai, this time it's chuuya's time to shine!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

## January 25th, Seven Years Since the Release of Corruption

There's a weird energy in the office that Dazai doesn't understand. He's having a severely unpleasant day, but that's his own personal suffering. Nobody else is being required to promote a song that they'd rather never hear again.

Dazai notices it right when he walks into the main office from the recording studio. He and Atsushi are taking a break after doing a couple hours of vocals. They're getting close to finishing Atsushi's debut album. The ADA had done a rush job to put out *Beast Beneath the Moonlight* after signing Atsushi in that mess with PMR and The Guild, but making a full album is taking them much longer.

Dazai watches his coworkers talk to each other in hushed voices while looking at their phones. It's very out of the ordinary. Hushed voices had no place in this office usually.

He turns to Atsushi, who is also scrolling through his phone with an alarmed expression.

“Something wrong?” asks Dazai, raising an eyebrow. His own phone is still on silent, and he’d like to keep it that way.

“Um,” says Atsushi, stammering. “Nakahara released a surprise solo album.”

Well, that’s...unexpected. Dazai actually doesn’t want to unpack all the emotions that he feels about that at this moment. But while that might be a cause of concern for Dazai himself, that didn’t explain why everyone else is behaving so erratically. “Why would that affect the ADA?”

Atsushi looks even more nervous, going slightly pale. “Um, well, one of the songs is kind of about you, Dazai.”

Dazai blinks at him in response. But before he can say anything he hears the song that’s playing in the background. He’s only heard it once before, but he recognizes it instantly.

“*Everything you touch, you destroy. Arahabaki, Arahabaki, Arahabaki,*” sings Chuuya’s voice over the radio, the song as hauntingly beautiful now as it had been seven years ago. The only difference is that Chuuya’s voice is even richer now with age and experience.

Dazai is walking towards the door before he even realizes it. “I have to go,” he somehow speaks over the giant lump in his throat. He ignores Atsushi’s protests as he rushes out of the office.

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## **February, Nearly Two Years and One Month Since the Release of Corruption**

Chuuya hadn’t exactly been looking forward to his first executive meeting. In fact, he’d been dreading it. Being stuck in a room with Dazai, Kouyou, Mori, and Ace (who Chuuya has only met a few times yet he’s somehow earned a spot in the top five most annoying people Chuuya knows, which is a fucking *feat* with the people Chuuya interacts with) had sounded like his own personal hell.

He had never imagined that his first meeting would be via a video conference at 5:30PM his time discussing what to do about the abrupt resignation of a fellow executive.

It’s been a week since Dazai had fucked off to parts unknown and left a heaping pile of shit in his wake. It’s been four days since Chuuya had been giving the news. He’s spent those days flip-flopping between thinking *I can’t believe he fucking did this* and *of course he fucking did this*.

During the day he’s been fine, work keeps him too busy to waste time thinking about it. It’s at night that he’s weaker. He sits on the balcony of his humongous rented house in Marseilles, staring out at the Mediterranean Sea instead of sleeping.

Chuuya watches the waves and tries to figure out how things had gone from the way they were a year ago to now. He keeps running through everything over and over again, as if he

can pinpoint the exact moment the most important person in his life had decided he wasn't even worth an explanation, a goodbye, anything. He tries to understand how Dazai had gone from whispering *I don't want you to go* over six months apart to leaving indefinitely without caring at all.

His emotions are an absolute clusterfuck. He doesn't have a word that even scratches the surface of how angry he is. He kind of wishes it were only anger he's dealing with. But there's also the almost overwhelming feelings of sorrow and wretchedness. Sometimes he just feels numb, like someone else is in control of his body and making it appear like he's functioning.

If he had to sum it up in a single word, he would say he feels alone.

Honestly, he should be better at this by now. Yet he's once again the dumbass still holding the rope who hasn't realized the person on the other side has already let go. But apparently it really is impossible to teach an old and incredibly stupid dog new tricks.

But Chuuya isn't going to showcase any of that absolutely pathetic behavior during an executive meeting. So he's here with a carefully controlled expression on his face as he listens to Mori start the meeting through the monitor of his new computer. The camera is set up so he can see the entire conference room (that he has still never been inside in person), though the empty chairs in the room stand out more than the filled ones.

"I appreciate everyone clearing their schedules to deal with this rather unexpected development," says Mori. His expression is difficult to figure out. His face is neutral, but there's almost a flicker of amusement in his eyes. "As you all know, Osamu Dazai has terminated his employment with Port Mafia Records. After a week of no contact from him, it's safe to assume his actions were intentional and he isn't going to return."

Chuuya keeps his face blank, but his hands are balled into fists out of sight under the table. Hearing Mori say it in such a calm tone makes it so much worse.

"So the arrogant little snot finally cracked under the pressure," says Ace, expression somewhere between a smirk and a sneer. "I can't say I'll miss him."

Chuuya is about to start telling Ace exactly where he could shove his opinion but Kouyou speaks up first.

"He was a major asset to Port Mafia Records even when he was fourteen," says Kouyou. She isn't smiling, and the look she gives Ace is barely hiding her contempt for him. "He will not be easy to replace."

"What's our strategy going to be to address his departure?" asks Chuuya, addressing his question to Mori. His voice comes out slightly harsh, the words louder and colder than he intended them to be. He doesn't turn to see Kouyou or Ace's reaction to them though, keeping his gaze fixed on Mori.

The flicker of amusement becomes even more apparent in Mori's eyes. "An excellent question, Chuuya. We are in a bit of a predicament. Port Mafia Records has never lost an

executive without signing an agreement before they left before.”

“Can’t we just go after him legally?” asks Ace. He looks almost bored. “We have more than enough resources to bring him down.”

“It isn’t that simple,” says Kouyou. Her expression has become more serious. “As an executive, Dazai was privilege to a lot of information that could be damaging to PMR if it ever reached the public. We can’t afford for him to reveal any of it to the wrong people.”

“He signed a four year recording contract a little over two and a half years ago,” says Chuuya, his voice coming out more normally this time. There’s still a slight edge to it though. “Regardless of what his plans are, he can’t break that.”

“Yes, he wouldn’t be foolish enough to try and release music under another label,” says Mori. He leans his elbows on the table and rests his head on his hands, his eyes focused on the table. It’s him at his most calculating, he’s dropped all of his phony cheerfulness.

Nobody speaks for a moment. Chuuya watches Mori, he feels like he can almost see the gears in his head churning frantically.

“Right,” says Mori, smiling again. He sits up fully. “I propose we do nothing.”

“Nothing?” repeats Ace, giving Mori a baffled look.

“That’s correct,” says Mori, his smile growing even wider. “Let Dazai throw his misguided tantrum. We shouldn’t waste our time on it. We have more important things to focus on.”

“Surely people are going to ask questions about his absence,” says Kouyou. Her confusion is more subtle than Ace’s, but she’s clearly surprised as well.

“They certainly will,” agrees Mori easily. “And we will avoid them. As Dazai once said, people love a good scandal. If anything it might boost sales a bit.”

“So he just gets away with this?” demands Chuuya. He doesn’t even care that he’s openly challenging Mori. He’s somewhere between shocked and furious.

“That’s not what I said,” says Mori. He fixes Chuuya with a cool look. “Dazai will pay for this transgression somewhere down the line, make no mistake. But now is not the time for personal feelings to interfere with what is best for Port Mafia Records.”

Chuuya takes a deep breath, the borderline scolding making him feel slightly humiliated but also calmer. “Of course, Boss. I apologize.”

“No need for that,” lies Mori, accepting the apology with a nod. “Much of this burden will fall on you, Chuuya. You’re going to have to be the one to sell the story. It’s best to get any apprehension about it out of the way now.”

“I can handle it,” says Chuuya, locking eyes with Mori. His words no longer hold anger, but a promise. He will not let PMR down, not now.

“I’m sure you can,” says Mori, giving Chuuya a more genuine smile than he usually uses. “If anyone gets pushy, inform them it’s a Port Mafia Records’ legal matter than you aren’t at liberty to discuss.”

“Understood,” says Chuuya. The idea of lying, and lying about this in particular, is tough to swallow. But he had meant what he said, for PMR, for his family, he will not falter. No matter how much it stings.

“It’s a sound approach to the problem,” says Kouyou. She still seems a little unsettled, although Chuuya is probably the only one who can tell. “But what are we going to do about his replacement?”

“Ah, yes, I’ve considered that as well,” says Mori. He leans back in his chair. “I’ve decided I’m going to leave his position open for now.”

“And what would be the logic behind that?” asks Kouyou, face and voice impressively blank.

“I’m not convinced that Dazai won’t come back once he’s calmed down,” says Mori with a shrug. “He’s not one for emotional outbursts. Also there isn’t anyone else who I feel would be a good fit for taking over the work he was in charge of, not presently at least.”

“That’s quite a gap we’re leaving vacant,” says Kouyou, crossing her arms.

“I believe the four of us will be able to fill it,” says Mori, going back to his cheery voice and smile. “We’ll distribute his unfinished projects among ourselves.”

“You want all of us to help oversee the marketing department?” asks Chuuya, not hiding his distaste for the task. He’s willing to lie, but he knows for a fact he’d be terrible at creating promotional materials. He’s never had the manipulative streak necessary to be good at it.

“No,” says Mori, and his smile now is about as close as he gets to a real laugh. “We’ll assign the tasks based on our respective skill sets. The marketing will fall mostly to myself. I think taking over the editing and music related functions he oversaw will suit you better, Chuuya.”

“Looking forward to it,” says Chuuya, giving him an answering smile. It’s actually mostly sincere.

His avoidance of music these past months hadn’t been a deliberative decision. After Arthur had died he had stopped listening to it almost reflexively. Every song had just made him think of him, and he hadn’t want to confront those thoughts. He had just needed a break from it all so that he could grieve at his own pace. The silence had been comforting in its own weird way.

It’s not that he wants to stop writing and playing music forever. Despite his success in doing administrative work, he doesn’t find it particularly fulfilling. He isn’t like Kouyou, he could never give it up for good.

Choosing *Arahabaki* as the first song he worked on had been a fucking mistake. He had thought all of the negative thoughts it brought with it were going to be worth what he gained



by doing it. But in the end he had just went through all that shit for nothing. The only thing he had gotten was a more fucked up sleep schedule than usual.

Chuuya isn't going to let that screwup hold him back anymore though. As opposed to losing Arthur, Dazai's disappearance has made him feel the opposite way about music. He wants to get lost in the notes and chords again. He had loved music before he had even met Dazai, and Dazai isn't going to ruin that for him. He isn't going to let him.

There's still a tiny part of him that's a little apprehensive about diving back into music, but Chuuya isn't going to focus on that. He misses playing too much to let his cowardice rule him. Even if it hurt, even if he felt like there was someone missing, he would face it head on. He'd rather feel pain than the nothing he's been using as a shield since October.

"Have things been resolved entirely with the Mimic project?" asks Ace, bringing him out of his thoughts. "I've got a bunch of their leftover merchandise that I'd like to get rid of."

"You can dispose of it," says Mori with a nod. "The police have everything they need. Our role in the matter is finished."

Chuuya has to make an effort not to react to that. He's not sure if he wants to scowl or roll his eyes more. PMR's underhanded deal with Mimic Industries isn't something he necessarily approves of. Anything other than music that PMR is involved in holds little interest to him, but he's never enjoyed the more unsavory elements of the music industry.

He'd managed to steer clear of anything having to do with the shadier sides of PMR's dealings until he became an executive and no longer had a choice in the matter. He still really isn't involved. He knows that Mori knows how he feels about it, and so far Mori hasn't minded his evasion. Mori seems to not care about Chuuya's obvious disdain as long as it doesn't affect his work.

Chuuya wishes the company would stick just to music, but he's aware that's a naive and impossible sentiment. This is L.A., and there are certainly worse offenders than PMR. It's unavoidable that there will be elements of his job that don't align with her personal views.

Still, he might have a lot of mixed feelings about Sakunosuke Oda, and he doesn't actually know him, but he has no doubts that he hadn't deserved what had happened to him. Chuuya tries to remind himself that in the end they'd taken out a major rival and had removed one of the major sellers of drugs from the music business. They also hadn't forced the heroin on Oda, he'd made that choice himself.

It's hard to stomach regardless. He knows it'll benefit PMR hugely in the long run, but there's a part of him that can't accept it as the right move.

But Chuuya isn't in charge, so he keeps his mouth shut. He's already risked challenging Mori once today. Plus now isn't exactly a great time to start raising questions about his loyalty.

"Is there anything else we needed to discuss?" asks Kouyou. Her voice makes Chuuya realize she's been watching him with a concerned expression. He quickly adjusts so he's looking at Mori again.

“I think we’ve settled the biggest concerns for now,” says Mori. “But stay on the line for a moment, Chuuya. I’d like to discuss some things with you in private.”

Ace doesn’t seem to mind the dismissal. He nods and gets up to leave, flicking his blonde hair obnoxiously as he exits the room. Kouyou hesitates a little more. She gives Chuuya a final look, but Chuuya doesn’t look back. Kouyou takes that as her answer and walks out of the room with slightly stiffer posture than usual.

“How are you doing?” asks Mori once they’re alone. His voice is light, but the question is anything but. Chuuya knows a test when he hears one.

“Things are going well in Marseilles,” answers Chuuya matter of factly. “The only record company that has been directly hostile is The Order of the Clocktower, and while they’re big in Europe they don’t have much of an international reach. I wouldn’t worry about them. Otherwise building connections has been progressing smoothly. Mimic Industries didn’t have many friends, no one has been sorry to see them go.”

“I’m ecstatic to hear that,” says Mori. He smiles at Chuuya widely. “But I meant how you were doing personally.”

They both know Chuuya knows exactly what he meant. Chuuya smiles back. “Never better,” he says easily.

“I’m assuming you no longer have any interest in recording an album now that it’s not going to be a Double Black one,” says Mori. His face is impassive.

“Your assumptions are almost never wrong, Boss,” says Chuuya. He shrugs a bit. “Plus with all the extra work from our ex-executive my hands are going to be pretty full anyway.”

The idea of trying to write an album right now sounds about as fun as dipping his entire body in acid. While he’s ready (or as ready as he’s going to be) to listen and work on others’ songs, he doesn’t think he could write anything for himself that isn’t him screaming about emptiness and inhumanity and how he inevitably destroys everything he cares about.

Chuuya can handle a lot, but he doesn’t think he could make it through that by himself. He’s not a masochist. The only reason he had even dragged *Arahabaki* out of the cesspit of his mind that he had tried to lock it in was because he had thought he wouldn’t be singing it alone.

He’s willing to do practically anything to prove his dedication to Port Mafia Records, but this is the one thing he refuses to budge on. Chuuya knows Mori is probably going to be disappointed, but he can’t bring himself to care. As an executive Mori can’t make him record music no matter how much he wants to.

“I thought that would be the case,” says Mori. His expression doesn’t change much, but there’s a subtle hint of a frown. “The decision is up to you of course.”

“Then I’m going to pass,” says Chuuya, trying to keep his voice light.

“Well, let me know if you ever change your mind,” says Mori cheerfully. “The offer is on the table whenever you want it.” He smile becomes more of a smirk. “I always thought you’d be better as a solo artist anyway.”

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### **March, Two Years, One Month, & One Week Since the Release of Corruption**

Chuuya has been successfully dodging Kouyou’s calls for over two weeks now. It helps that there’s a nine hour time difference between them. He’s been claiming he’d been sleeping instead of watching his phone ring and setting it down when she calls at night.

They both know it’s a bunch of bullshit, but Chuuya’s going to have to make a career out of lying now. He might as well start with one that benefits him. He has to admire her persistence though. The number of calls has remained steady. Kouyou Ozaki does not take being ignored lying down.

Chuuya had thought he would be safe while he’s in the office. Right now he’s making some suggestions on a new Black Lizards’ song. The sound is distinctly different with the changes in personnel, but the differences aren’t bad. Ryuunosuke’s voice is a good fit just like he’d thought it would be.

Despite his reservations, working on music has felt like coming home after being away for a long time. There’s been moments where he’s slipped and wished he could ask Dazai’s opinion on something, but for the most part it’s been good. He finds himself playing the songs in his head even after he leaves work for the day. Chuuya no longer feels like he needs to use silence as an anchor.

The song he’s working on is called *Of Dawn, Of Dusk* and has a fairly impressive drumbeat. He should text Tachihara about it when it’s not two in the morning in L.A. They’ve tried to stay in touch even though they’re not in the same band anymore.

Mich hadn’t seemed upset over him leaving The Black Lizards. He’d been more concerned about the way Chuuya had tried to drink an entire bar in front of him the last time they’d seen each other in person. Chuuya had tried to apologize, but Tachihara had told him it was unnecessary. He’d backed off and given Chuuya the space he’d clearly wanted at the time.

Tachihara’s been texting him more ever since Dazai left though. Although the texts aren’t about him thankfully. They’re all complaining about Ryuunosuke Akutagawa. Tachihara hadn’t exactly been a big fan of his in the first place, but apparently since Dazai had left Akutagawa has become even more of a basket case.

**I’m going to murder him, Tachihara had texted him earlier this week. I don’t care if Gin murders me back. Kajii was better than this. He was a raging lunatic but at least he wasn’t a stuck up dickhead.**

Chuuya tries to send him his virtual support. He also feels for Hirotsu, the old guy can’t seem to catch a break. Even with different people the band is still always on the brink of a massive fight.

There's a part of him that feels sorry for Ryuunosuke. Despite not being involved at all, he's aware of how Dazai had been a mentor to him. He would have been devastated if Kouyou had taken off back when he was working with her. But he would be a lot more sympathetic if he weren't taking out those feelings on Mich and his sister (and admittedly he can't help but feel irritated with Akutagawa for being such an ass over this when Chuuya is doing his fucking best to not let it affect him.)

He's drafting an email with his notes on the song suggesting some tweaks to it when Simone knocks on his door. She always knocked the same way, a quick rap of her fist three times.

Chuuya hadn't known what to think of the woman who worked the front desk when he first met her. She had won him over fairly quickly though. Simone didn't take any shit from anyone, not even himself despite how much he outranks her. But she was also kind, she had started bringing him tea fairly often after noticing how much he drank it.

"Come in," he calls out. He finishes the sentence he's typing and looks up.

"Mr. Nakahara?" she says as she opens the door. "Kouyou Ozaki is on the phone for you."

Chuuya sighs deeply. Damn it, he likes Simone way too much to put her through the trauma of trying to lie to Kouyou. This had probably been her plan. He hadn't really thought he could put off speaking to her forever, but he'd thought he could stretch it out a bit longer.

He does feel a tiny bit guilty over not talking to Kouyou. It's been more out of self-preservation than anything. Chuuya knows that no one else will push him to talk about Dazai. But Kouyou isn't going to let him get away with false bravado like the others. She's going to force him to showcase how despicable and damaged he is.

He had know it was inevitable, but that doesn't make it easier to accept.

"Put her through," says Chuuya, rubbing his eyes with one hand.

"Are you sure?" asks Simone, watching him with a raised eyebrow.

"No," says Chuuya with a snort. "But do it anyway."

Simone nods and shuts the door again. She also isn't very chatty, another one of the reasons Chuuya likes her.

Chuuya picks up his office phone, bringing it up to his ear with dread.

"Kouyou," says Chuuya brightly. "I've been meaning to get back to you. But you've caught me right in the middle of something. So I'm going to have to-."

"Chuuya Nakahara," Kouyou cuts him off, voice as hard as steel, "So help me if you hang up this phone I will take the next flight to Marseilles and hogtie you to a chair until you speak to me."

Chuuya barely muffles a groan. He hadn't really thought that would work, but he had to try. "What?" he asks resignedly.

“Don’t *what* me,” says Kouyou haughtily. She sighs then, her voice going to something much less unkind. “How are you?”

“I’m amazing,” says Chuuya flatly. “Now if that’s all you called to ask-.”

“Chuuya,” Kouyou interrupts him again, no hint of softness left. “Don’t do this. It’s just me. You can be honest.”

That’s exactly the problem. “I’m terrible,” says Chuuya, tone sharp. “Happy now?”

“Why would that make me happy?” asks Kouyou, voice gentler again.

“You’re the one who warned me he was probably just using me for one of his schemes,” says Chuuya. The words are filled with bitterness. “You were right, as per usual.”

“I don’t know what happened between you two,” says Kouyou carefully, “But I saw him after you left for Japan. He wouldn’t have looked that upset over just a scheme gone wrong.”

“It doesn’t matter anymore,” says Chuuya, trying to fight down the ache Kouyou’s words bring. “He *left*, Kouyou. When it came down to it, he decided I wasn’t even worth a single fucking word before he fucked off. I hate him.”

Kouyou doesn’t seem to have a response to that. The line stays quiet for a moment.

“I know about everything that happened with Mimic,” says Chuuya lowly. “And I would have done anything. I would have left France without question. I would have gone anywhere or done whatever it took to help him. All he had to do was ask.” He has to pause to clear his throat. He forces himself to keep going. “But he didn’t. He clearly doesn’t give a single shit about me anymore.”

“Chuuya, I know you care about him-,” starts Kouyou.

He laughs harshly, cutting her off. “You and I both know I more than just *care* about him.”

Chuuya doesn’t think he’s ever been in a conversation with Kouyou where she’s been speechless twice, but she stays silent once again.

“Please,” says Chuuya softly, his voice trembling a bit despite him trying to keep it steady. “I can’t talk about this.” He hates to have to plead like this, it makes him feel weak and childish. But it’s preferable to having to keep discussing this. It’s like stabbing himself over and over again.

“If that’s what you want,” says Kouyou, her voice quieter too.

Chuuya has to fight off another laugh. When is the last time he actually got what he wanted?

“I could come out there,” offers Kouyou, tone normal again.

“Kouyou, do you know how that would look?” asks Chuuya. Even if he would love to see her, he can’t afford to look fragile right now. He can imagine Mori’s reaction to him needing

help with this, and that alone is enough to make him know it's a bad idea.

"You used to not care about things like that," says Kouyou. She doesn't sound disappointed though, it comes off as just sad.

"I am not going to fall apart over this," declares Chuuya, voice more confident than it's been this whole conversation (since he'd gotten the news actually). He's making a vow to himself just as much as he is to Kouyou. "I am going to work my ass off. I am going to make PMR better than it's ever been before. I am going to be so fucking successful that the only attachment of my name to *Osamu Dazai* is that guy I used to play music with when I was a kid."

"That sounds more like the Chuuya I know," says Kouyou, clearly approving. "Although I could do without the language."

Chuuya laughs a little, more genuinely instead of bitter this time. "This is just a temporary setback. You don't need to worry about me."

"I'm always going to worry about you," says Kouyou matter of factly. "No matter how old you get, it's still my job to watch out for you. Nothing is ever going to change that."

Chuuya smiles slightly, even though her support hurts as much as it helps. He'd thought the same about everyone who had eventually discarded him. He wants to believe Kouyou is different, but he can't stop the small uncertainty that manifests. (It's the question that's always lurking in the back of his mind, is the reason everyone eventually leaves because he isn't human enough?)

He pushes it down though. Chuuya isn't going to let his doubts take over his life. Arthur had been the one to teach him that. Chuuya had lost sight of that when he had died, but now more than ever he's trying to follow his advice. Even if he isn't fucking human, he's not going to give up on the people who he cares about. A life without others, without music, is hollow. He will not live that way.

But as much as Kouyou is trying to make him feel better, there are certain things she doesn't know about him. There are reasons why Dazai's leaving had cut deeper than any other before that she isn't aware of. They had always skirted around discussing Chuuya's life before joining PMR. Kouyou knows that he'd lived with his mom before she'd died and that he'd never met his father, but she doesn't know much beyond the basic details.

It isn't that he doesn't trust her. He does, he knows she would burn down the world in order to protect him. But protection isn't the same as understanding. Kouyou had said it herself, she would always be worried about Chuuya. If he told her about his past, she would see it as another thing she had to be concerned about, a weakness.

Chuuya doesn't want sympathy, he never has. What he really wants is someone he can be completely himself with. He wants someone to listen to the music he writes and recognize everything that it means, someone to really *hear* him. He'd thought he'd found that in Dazai. In fact, Dazai's acceptance of everything Chuuya had ever told him without question had made him feel more human than he ever had before.

(It's why despite how much he genuinely loathes him and is absolutely furious with him, he can't deny he's also anxious whether Dazai is okay or not wherever he's run off to.)

Chuuya might not be able to give Kouyou the full truth, but he can give her peace of mind at least. He doesn't want her to waste her time worrying about this. He will not be a burden to her.

"You should be more concerned about how I'm going to knock you out of your spot as the top executive of Port Mafia Records," says Chuuya, tone deliberately cocky and annoying. "I don't know if you've heard, but the European office is flourishing under my steady guidance."

"You've got a long way to go before you'll catch up to me," says Kouyou. He can make out the subtle amusement in her voice. "But I can explain to you how out of your league you are another time. It is getting a bit late here."

"Yeah, I'll talk to you soon," says Chuuya. This time his smile comes easier. "Thanks Kouyou."

"No need for that," says Kouyou brusquely. "But if you ever ignore my calls for this long again there will be consequences."

That actually makes him laugh for real. "Message received," he says.

When Dazai had first left Port Mafia Records, he'd been somewhat excited despite all the terrible things that had been happening. It had been thrilling in a way to strike out on his own and give Mori the finger as he did. Now that it's been over a month, he's mostly just bored.

Dazai can't really go anywhere or do anything that will draw too much attention to himself. He's been out of the spotlight for the most part since the Double Black tour had ended, but he's still too well known to be able to walk around freely. Every time he does go out he has to bundle himself up in clothing, and Taneda gets all twitchy about it.

Living with Santoka Taneda has been interesting. Taneda is one of those cops who spends almost all his time working. Even when he is home he's pouring over case files or on his laptop. He doesn't care much about what Dazai does as long as he's not directly bothering him or putting himself in jeopardy (although he's forbidden Dazai from drinking alcohol because he's *too young*, which is kind of hilarious).

Most of their interactions occur over the dinner table. Taneda insists on them eating together every night. It's baffling to Dazai. Most of his meals the past couple years have been on the go or business related. He can't remember the last time he had eaten a home-cooked meal

before moving in with Taneda. The closest he can think of is eating frozen pizza in Chuuya's dorm when they were writing the album.

But every day like clockwork Taneda will knock on his door and call out that dinner is ready in a boisterous voice. The first couple times Dazai had felt it would be rude to refuse. He's in Taneda's debt right now, if he wanted to eat dinner with him he could do it. Now it's become part of his routine. He automatically gets up off his bed when Taneda calls, sitting down with the other man in the main room.

Taneda's house isn't as luxurious as the kind of accommodations Dazai had been used to with Port Mafia Records, but it isn't shabby. Taneda clearly makes some decent money to have a place this nice by himself in L.A. He's a captain in the Detective Services Group for the LAPD, in the Special Investigation Section specifically. It's the division Ango (that deceptive cretin) had belonged to before switching to the Gang and Narcotics Division. (Dazai had banned all further talk about Ango very early on after moving in.)

The house is farther away from the ocean than Dazai had lived the past couple years. It's closer to the police station in downtown L.A, though far enough away to not be outrageously expensive. It's a little odd to not have the smell of salt in the air as strongly when he goes outside. But it's also kind of nice, the beach holds too many memories that Dazai would rather not dwell on.

The house is two stories with three bedrooms and two bathrooms. They're a decent size, Dazai's bedroom is about the same size it had been in his old apartment. Taneda's room is on the second floor, and Dazai doesn't go up there much. He sticks mostly to the first floor. At first he had felt like an intruder spending time in the main room, but his boredom had overtaken his propriety fairly quickly.

One of Dazai's only sources of entertainment has been snooping around the house. Taneda is, well, strange. He has barely any decorations, and the decor he does have is mismatched and unusual. There also aren't many pictures around the house. It's hard to gauge much about the person living here just from looking around.

Probably the biggest surprise about his new living situation is how nothing has been all that awkward between them. Dazai had gone in with the mentality that this was a temporary arrangement and Taneda was just a means to an end. But Taneda has somehow won him over with his weird personality.

Dazai had been expecting him to be like Ango for some reason, uptight and serious. Instead Taneda is almost always smiling. He constantly makes jokes, even if he's the only one who laughs at them. He and Dazai never talk about anything very serious. But Taneda's energy is hard to resist. Dazai usually leaves the dinner table in a better mood than when he had sat down, despite the food always being very average. Taneda's cooking is fairly basic. It mostly consists of pasta and various meats.

It's strange how they almost never talk about music. Dazai is used to constantly discussing music or things related to music. Taneda doesn't even have many albums around the house (and Dazai has done a thorough search of the place.) He seems to prefer books. The third bedroom of the house is used for Taneda's home office (even though he usually ends up



working at the dining room table or on the couch), and the walls in there are lined with full bookshelves.

Dazai's focus on music hadn't left him much time to read in the past, but now he's working his way through Taneda's personal library. Taneda always makes a point to ask him what he's reading and tries to get him to read his favorite novels. Some days Dazai wakes up and wonders how in the world this became his life, living with a police officer and discussing literature over dinner.

The books are particularly handy in terms of helping him keep his mind occupied. It's when he's left with nothing to do that his thoughts start to wander into dangerous territory.

First up on Dazai's mind tour of horrors is usually thinking about Odasaku. He tries to come up with ways he could have stopped him from ending up in the treatment center he's at with no contact with the outside world. Thoughts about Oda lead to wondering about Kousuke, Katsumi, Yuu, Shinji and Sakura, the children Oda would probably never see again. They might never see each other again either, they'd likely end up in different homes. Dazai had never even met the kids, but he can't stop thinking about how they were being stripped of a parent who actually loved them and Dazai had let it happen.

When he's done beating himself up about Odasaku he turns to berating himself for ignoring all of the warning signs about Ango's deception. If Dazai had really been paying attention he could have put together the discrepancies in Ango's stories and actions. But Dazai had liked being at the Lupin all together too much to follow up on the red flags. Sometimes he plays a game where he debates if he were in a room with Mori and Ango and only got to punch one of them in the face who would he hit (Mori wins but it gets very close.)

Eventually he always arrives at the worst subject, Chuuya Nakahara. Dazai still hasn't let go of the anger he holds towards him for cutting him off after he left for Japan. And he's equally angry about how Chuuya had pulled some sort of twisted test of loyalty in January that Dazai had failed because he didn't even *know* about it. There's also a new annoyance at Chuuya's willingness to be a pawn for Port Mafia Records without question. Chuuya has chosen to place his faith in Ogai Mori, and that speaks volumes about his horrendous judge of character.

But much worse than his fury towards Chuuya is how much it aches at how they ended up like this, how they went from partners to nothing. Of all of his many regrets, his biggest one is how he should have fucking gotten on that plane to Japan.

When Dazai is at his lowest (which isn't very often thankfully) he pulls out a slightly battered toothbrush, one of the only things he'd kept when he'd cleared out his apartment. He stares at that stupid plastic contraption and asks himself how the sound of someone's voice can be both consoling and awful. The sound quality is abysmal through the speaker, but he isn't likely to ever hear the real thing again.

So distracting himself has become essential. He just has to make it until next August before he's set to sign with the Audio Detective Agency. Taneda hasn't given him many details about Yukichi Fukuzawa other than that they're friends and he's supposedly a good person. The concept of working for a *good person* has Dazai intrigued.

However, that's still a year and four months away. That's why he'd purchased the instrument he's currently holding. Dazai has never played much besides the guitar and the piano occasionally. But he has nothing but time on his hands to learn this one.

Dazai brings the mouthpiece of the saxophone up to his face, letting out an experimental noise. It rings out unpleasantly in his bedroom. Dazai smiles at the mediocre sound, he's always loved a good challenge.

He's gotten it to sound a little less like a dying animal when Taneda bursts into his room, not knocking for once.

"What in the blazes are you doing in here?" asks Taneda. His voice is more confused than angry (not that Dazai has ever really seen him angry before.) He's still wearing the clothes he slept in, although it's late morning on a Saturday.

"Playing the saxophone," says Dazai simply, gesturing with the instrument as proof.

"Why?" asks Taneda, rubbing his eyes behind his glasses.

"I'm broadening my musical horizons," says Dazai with a large smile.

"Look, I know you're bored," says Taneda, coming further into the room. "But there are things you can do besides butcher a woodwind instrument. Or at least you could do it when I'm at work."

"What else am I supposed to do?" asks Dazai, pouting slightly. "I can't get a job. My only skills are in music. And any job in the music industry is out of the question until I'm no longer contracted to PMR. I'm stuck."

Taneda sighs. "Dazai, have you never heard of ghostwriting?"

Dazai pauses, because he hadn't really considered the idea. It's been a long time since he actually tried to write a full song. He'd given suggestions on others', but he doesn't think he's written anything substantial since he'd become an executive. He and Akutagawa had worked on a song together, but that had turned out to be nothing like everything else with him.

The idea is slightly intimidating. Dazai doesn't doubt his own skills, music has never been particularly difficult for him. It's the thought of being completely in charge, no Mori over his shoulder to seek approval from. No loudmouthed and opinionated redhead beside him to force him to make music that "makes people feel something."

The intimidation makes it even more appealing. This would be an even greater challenge than the saxophone (which Dazai still might dabble in when Taneda isn't here to complain).

Dazai sets the saxophone down on his bed and gives Taneda a huge grin. "Can my writer name be Obama Doozy?"

Taneda snorts but then fixes Dazai with a more serious look. "This isn't a joke. You could get into a lot of trouble if Port Mafia Records finds out and tries to say you broke your contract."

“I was kidding, Taneda,” says Dazai, rolling his eyes. “Lighten up. I know how to choose a fake name. Osamu Dazai isn’t my birth name.”

Taneda raises his eyebrows at the information, and Dazai’s eyes widen. He hadn’t decided to say that. It had just slipped out. He had never told anyone that before. The only one who had known had been Mori. He hadn’t even told Chuuya when Chuuya had revealed his own last name was false.

Curse Taneda and his absurdly trustworthy nature. Dazai feels like he’s been duped into spilling his secrets. Is this why Taneda is such a good cop?

“Then surely you can come up with something better,” says Taneda, voice amused. His smile is kind though. Then he blessedly changes the subject. “Where did you even get that saxophone?”

“I bought it from the pawn shop down the street,” says Dazai with a smirk. “I got quite a deal on it.”

“I need more coffee,” says Taneda. He shakes his head and walks towards the door. “You want some, kid?”

Dazai can’t recall the last time someone called him kid (unless they were using it as an insult). It surprisingly doesn’t bother him. “Sure,” he says, getting up and following Taneda into the kitchen.

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## **April 29, Two Years & Three Months Since the Release of Corruption**

Possibly one of the best parts about being in France is that nobody here cares that it’s his birthday.

While Double Black had been just as popular in Europe, it’s been over two years since it came out and some of the fanfare has died out here. Falling Camellia had done well domestically but wasn’t as well known abroad. So Chuuya is still recognized fairly often, but it’s nothing compared to when he’s in L.A.

Chuuya doesn’t mind meeting fans anyway, never has. He’d like it a little more if just fucking once someone’s favorite song wasn’t *Corruption*, but that’s unlikely.

He mostly hangs around the office and his rented house. Chuuya is finally getting somewhat better at French, but he still doesn’t go out all that much. He doesn’t know a lot of people outside of work. Plus he’s usually way too busy to do much exploring anyway. There had been a reason there used to be five executives, not that Chuuya is going to point that out.

The only person who’s said anything to him today about his birthday is Simone, and all she’d given him was his usual mug of tea and a croissant. Chuuya should seriously give her a raise.

He’ll probably hear from his friends later on once it’s his birthday in L.A. He’d tried to tell everyone to not make a fuss. But he does that every year, and it’s yet to actually work. Last

year Kouyou had bought him a fucking boat of all things. It's in a warehouse back home (because he has no idea how to drive a boat and doesn't have the time to learn.)

Chuuya is determined not to let today be like last year. He has resolved that he will not think about the person who he used to celebrate with (and how the fuck had *his* birthday become about another fucking person?)

Chuuya is sitting at his desk in the morning and drinking his tea while reading his email when his office door is flung open, hitting the opposite wall with a bang. He's extremely caught off guard. No one has ever barged into his office here before.

*"Happy birthday to you,"* sings motherfucking Motojiro Kajii as he steps through the doorway. He points at Chuuya as he sashays into the room with a huge grin on his face.

*"Happy birthday to you,"* sings Gin as she appears next. Her voice isn't as polished as Kajii's, it's surprisingly girlish and sweet. Her smile is uncharacteristically big as she twirls into the room.

*"Happy birthday to Chuuuuuuuuuya,"* croons Tachihara, sliding into the room on his knees. His voice on the other hand is very rough, but he belts out the words loudly with gusto.

"I'm not doing this," says Ryuunosuke Akutagawa flatly, standing in the doorway and crossing his arms. He scowls at the other people in the room.

Kajii groans loudly and puts his heads in his hands. "You are the definition of a killjoy, Little Gecko," whines Kajii as he lifts his head and glares at Akutagawa.

"I told you to stop calling me that," says Akutagawa crossly.

At that Chuuya can't hold back his laughter anymore. He stands up and comes around the desk, helping Tachihara to his feet then pulling him into a hug. "What the fuck are you guys doing here?" he asks as he shoves Tachihara away to hug Gin next.

"A man's nineteenth birthday is a very important rite of passage," says Kajii. He and Chuuya fist bump as a greeting.

Chuuya rolls his eyes. He doesn't bother trying to greet Akutagawa. He's still sulking in the doorway.

"We didn't want to you be alone," says Gin. If anyone else had said it, it might have come off as pitying. But Gin makes it a straightforward fact.

"Plus," says Tachihara with a smirk, "French vacation, baby."

"And Hirotzu made us take our little apprentice," says Kajii, gesturing towards Akutagawa. Akutagawa's scowl only deepens. "He probably didn't want to be stuck with the prince of darkness."

"I am not your apprentice," says Akutagawa, in the tone of someone who has said the words many times before. He sighs and his frown lessens slightly as he looks at Chuuya. "Happy

birthday Executive Nakahara.”

“I can’t believe I used to think Gin was the uptight one,” mutters Tachihara to Chuuya. Gin clearly hears him and socks him in the arm.

Chuuya smiles and shakes his head. “Thanks Akutagawa. I still can’t believe you guys are here. Aren’t you supposed to be working on your albums?”

“To write one needs life experiences,” says Kajii breezily. “To remain in one place too long stifles the creativity.”

“Shut the fuck up,” says Chuuya, but he’s laughing.

“Sorry, Mr. Nakahara,” says Simone, appearing behind Akutagawa. “I tried to stop them from barging in but was unable to.”

They all start laughing except Akutagawa.

“Don’t worry about it, Simone,” says Chuuya, trying to contain his laughter. “These idiots wouldn’t have listened to you. I’m going to have to spend the rest of the day dealing with our unexpected guests. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Have a good time, sir,” says Simone, just the hint of a smile present as she walks away.

“So,” says Tachihara. “Where to?”

A couple hours later they’re all on the beach in front of Chuuya’s house. The area is private property, and there’s not too many people on the beach in April anyway. None of them care though, they keep warm by moving around and drinking.

Gin, Tachihara, and Akutagawa are throwing a frisbee. Or rather Gin and Tachihara are throwing the frisbee at each other in the most difficult way they can so the other has to scramble and dive to catch it then Gin throws it to her brother once in a while.

Chuuya is sitting in one of the beach chairs with Kajii, watching them with a glass of wine in his hand. He laughs as Mich wipes out on the sand after Gin throws one way over his head.

Kajii snorts a bit too, sipping a beer. He stretches out in his chair, digging his toes into the sand. He keeps his voice casual as he asks the question Chuuya has been waiting for, but he keeps his volume low so no one else can hear them. “So you really haven’t heard from the bandaged weirdo once since he left?”

Chuuya has to admire Kajii’s balls for asking him at the very least. “Nope,” answers Chuuya lightly. He takes a long drink of wine. “And good riddance.”

“You two used to be, like, obsessed with each other,” says Kajii, wrinkling his nose. “It was kind of disgusting.”

“Fuck off,” says Chuuya, but he’s laughing despite himself. If anyone other than Kajii had said it Chuuya would have been furious (or the infinitely more horrifying option of grim and

melancholic). But there isn't a speck of pity in Kajii's tone. He'd just been genuinely curious.

"How is your album coming along?" asks Chuuya, changing the subject before his amusement can sour. "Your new, *experimental* sound."

"I can hear the mocking in your voice, pipsqueak," says Kajii, pointing his beer towards him in what is supposed to be a threat. "Don't think just because it's your birthday that I won't fuck you up."

"Please," says Chuuya with a smirk. "We both know I can hit harder than you."

"My album is coming along excellently," says Kajii haughtily. "I should thank whosever idea it was for me to go solo and spread my genius wings."

"They probably don't want your thanks," says Chuuya. He finishes off his wine and buries the glass in the sand slightly so it stays upright. "They probably just felt sorry for Tachihara and Gin for having to deal with you and wanted to spare them the headaches."

"You've got a pretty sweet gig here," says Kajii, gesturing around them. "Food, booze, hot French people. At first I thought you were crazy when I heard you picked this place instead of Paris."

"It has its moments," says Chuuya with a slight shrug. This is definitely one of them.

"I think I might stick around," says Kajii casually, as if the thought has just come to him. "The only thing I really need to write music is my brilliant mind after all. L.A. is too stuffy for me."

"You're staying?" asks Chuuya, not able to keep the excitement out of his voice. "How long?"

"Well, you're here until the end of the summer, right?" asks Kajii, giving Chuuya a smirk. "I'll just tag along when you go back."

"You mean I'm stuck with you until August?" asks Chuuya, trying to sound annoyed about it.

"Oh, we are going to tear this city apart, Baby Red," declares Kajii, grinning with almost all his teeth.

"Looking forward to it, Lemon Fucker," says Chuuya, giving him an answering smile.

Kajii cackles and chugs the rest of his beer as the others come back to join them. Tachihara is slightly out of breath as he lays in the sand in front of them. Gin doesn't look phased at all as she takes a seat on her towel. Akutagawa sits down next to her, though he looks less annoyed than he had been when they'd first arrived.

"It has been way too long since the four of us have been together," says Kajii, his tone somewhere between mocking and sincere. "We should commemorate this occasion somehow."

“I know what we can do,” says Tachihara immediately, smirking and raising his eyebrows.

“Not this again,” says Gin, rolling her eyes.

“Why am I the only true Black Lizard left?” asks Tachihara. He lets out a yelp of pain as Gin kicks him.

“What’s your big idea, Mich?” asks Chuuya. It almost feels like they’re back on tour, hanging out after a show together. Chuuya hasn’t felt this content in ages.

“Tachihara,” says Gin, and no one ever says his name with as much derision as she always manages to, “Keeps trying to get me to get matching lizard tattoos with him.”

“*Black* lizards,” corrects Tachihara, smirking at her. She rolls her eyes again.

“All tattoos are black unless you ask for a different color,” says Gin flatly. It’s clear this is not the first time they’ve discussed this.

“You expect me to mar my beautiful body with a reptile?” asks Kajii, raising a hand to his chest in offense.

“I’m in,” announces Chuuya confidently. Everyone stops what else they were doing to look at him in surprise. “There’s a bunch of tattoo shops around here we can go to.”

Tachihara’s face lights up. “Birthday boy’s word is law!”

“I’m not doing this,” cuts in Akutagawa, looking even more unhappy than he had when he’d first shown up in Chuuya’s office.

The rest of them burst out in laughter, Chuuya almost falling out of his chair with the force of it. Even Gin can’t help but giggle at her brother, having to lean against Tachihara to stay upright. Kajii is laughing probably the hardest.

The moment makes Chuuya smile so hard it almost hurts. This is much better than shutting himself up in his office would have been. He’s never cared much about presents, but this is way beyond what he could have asked for. It’s not his best birthday (that would be his seventeenth, which he is refusing to think about today), but it’s a very, very close number two.

Dazai spends April 29th taking the day off from songwriting, curling up on Taneda’s couch with a book and a cup of tea (even though he still doesn’t care for the beverage). And if later

that night he watches old videos of a certain duo instead of sleeping, well no one has to know that.

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### **Late May, Two Years & Four Months Since the Release of Corruption**

Being in Marseilles has changed drastically since Kajii got here. While before Chuuya had barely spent any time in the city, now Kajii drags him out almost every night. Chuuya had eaten out and taken advantage of the French wine back when he was by himself, but now he is intimately familiar with all of the clubs and bars in Marseilles.

During the day Chuuya gets work done. He's keeping things mostly afloat. The music related work is actually his easiest now. It's the administrative things that take up more time. Kouyou is much better at this ass kissing stuff than he is, but he's the one who's in Europe. He has to visit other record companies and contacts out here to try and make connections for PMR. It's usually only a day trip here or there. Kajii still whines and accuses him of abandoning him when he's gone.

Chuuya likes to think that Kajii is working on his album during the day but doesn't actually want to ask him about it. Chuuya had refused to let him stay with him, claiming that he'd kill Kajii if he had to spend that much time with him. So Kajii has his own apartment, which he'd picked to be closer to downtown than the beach.

Kajii still annoys the shit out of him constantly, but he can't deny he's having way more fun. Chuuya hadn't know what to think of French nightlife at first, but now he genuinely has a great time. The music is more often than not just loud and full of bass, but Chuuya tries to not be a snob about it. Barely anyone ever cares about who they are when they're out and in the middle of the dance floor with drinks in hand.

Unlike Chuuya, Kajii is refusing to learn French and is determined to get by on his "wit and charisma." Chuuya had spit he'd laughed so hard when Kajii had told him that. It's working surprisingly well for him. He gets Chuuya to order for him when they get food or drinks, and then he manages to somehow persuade a never ending stream of people to go home with him. He almost never goes back to his apartment alone.

Chuuya has been in a good mood for the most part for weeks now, only ever faltering when thoughts about Dazai threaten to creep in. But Chuuya has kept them at bay with his new lifestyle of being constantly in motion.

Or he had been, until now. It's interesting (in a fucked up kind of way) that last year he'd barely reacted to the anniversary. He'd meant it when Dazai had asked if whether he should come out there and he'd said he was fine. He had been fine. It hadn't been fucking fun, but he'd dealt with it fairly easily.

This year is not going as well. It's like his memories are on never-ending loop in his head. He's barely slept the past couple days. He's starting to get dark circles under his eyes.

Chuuya has lost both the people he could talk about this with. He's certainly not going to talk to fucking Kajii about this shit. So he's doing his best to force it down. He'd come with Kajii



to his favorite club tonight despite being kind of exhausted. Anything is better than being alone with his thoughts.

He's dancing with a couple of blonde girls right now, drinking from his beer while swaying his hips to the beat (wine spills way too easily unfortunately, and Kajii had made him switch to beer after dousing him in red wine too many times). Chuuya has become very good at making fast friends while he's out when Kajii flirts with people. Not that Chuuya minds, he'd probably deck Kajii if he had to listen to his seductions up close. Or gag.

Most of the music that plays here is in French, and Chuuya is happy when he can follow along with some of it. A lot of it is remixes anyway, the tempos changed to be more upbeat. He'd almost laughed the first time he'd heard *Nausea* by Jean-Paul Sartre while out, the lyrics about existentialism blaring while people jumped up and down.

Chuuya is even more amused right now dancing to Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*. He'll have to text Jane about this. She would love it. He wonders how she and the rest of Tachihara's old crew are doing, it's been a really long time since he's seen them.

The air in the room abruptly shifts though as the next song starts playing. There's no music to accompany the opening lines. Chuuya stands frozen as he hears his own voice blare out over the speakers.

"*Oh grantors of dark disgrace,*" plays out loudly. There are shrieks of joy around the room and almost everyone around him joins in on the second line, the noise practically deafening. "*Do not wake me again.*"

The beat drops then, and Chuuya can't even register the people jumping and screaming along to the song. His vision is fuzzy, and he's vaguely aware that he's moving. He doesn't feel completely coherent again until he's pushed his way to the bathroom, kneeling in one of the stalls in front of the toilet and emptying his stomach.

He'd like to believe the tears that leak out of his eyes are just from the puke as he wipes them. Chuuya can still hear the song perfectly through the thin walls of the place. He coughs but doesn't throw up again as Dazai's voice rings out, and his breathing is shallow as he kneels on the gross bathroom floor.

He presses his hands to his eyes, trying to stop the slight trembling of his body. He's disgusted with himself and his helplessness at a single fucking song, a song he has heard a million fucking times by now.

It's about halfway through the next song when Chuuya has his shit together enough to exit the stall, flushing the puke down with shame. There's another guy washing his hands at the sink, and he looks at Chuuya as he walks over, his glazed stare hard.

"Are you Chuuya Nakahara?" asks the man, words slightly slurred.

"No," says Chuuya sharply, washing his hands quickly so he can get the fuck out of here.

The door to the bathroom opens before he can leave though, and Kajii walks in. His eyes find Chuuya, and he lets out a sigh under his breath.

“There you are,” says Kajii, and his smile is blatantly fake. “Let’s ditch, Baby Red. The music here is trash tonight.”

Any other night Chuuya would have fought him. He would have tried to play it off like it didn’t matter. He would have shoved the pity and lies away. But he just can’t right now. “Sure,” he answers, voice coming out a little thick.

“Are you Motojiro Kajii?” asks the other man who’s still in the bathroom, now leaning against the counter. He’s staring at Kajii with raised eyebrows.

“You should go home, buddy,” says Kajii dismissively, grabbing Chuuya’s arm and dragging him out of the club. Chuuya lets him, they dart around the other people to get to the exit. Chuuya finally shakes off Kajii’s grip as they get outside, his ears ringing slightly after being in the loud club so long.

Chuuya tries to take what he hopes is a subtle deep breath. The taste of bile in his mouth is making it hard to relax. It’s annoying that they’re too far away from the sea to hear or smell it.

“You can crash at my pad if you want,” offers Kajii, tone still off. He’s so out of his element it’s almost funny. “We’re only like a block away.”

Chuuya means to tell him no. Instead he says, “Alright.”

They don’t talk at all as they walk to Kajii’s apartment. Kajii sets him up with a blanket and a pillow on the couch and Chuuya thanks him, trying to sound normal. Neither of them are at ease as Kajii leaves him to go into the bedroom. Chuuya hasn’t spent much time here, but he luckily falls asleep fairly quickly, a combination of the alcohol and how little he’s slept lately.

Chuuya regrets his choice of not going home deeply when he wakes up to Kajii shaking him, his expression somewhere between bewildered and disturbed.

Chuuya shoves him away as soon as he’s fully awake, both extremely embarrassed and strung out. He pulls the blanket closer to him, looking up at Kajii with a glare.

“You were fucking, like, thrashing around,” says Kajii, hands still up in front of him.

“Yeah, it’s called a nightmare,” says Chuuya, voice harsh. He stands up and walks over to the door to the balcony, opening it and stepping outside, slamming the door behind him.

He leans against the railing, taking in the city around him. It’s somewhere in-between night and day, the sky a blend of black with pink starting to creep in. Chuuya doesn’t know what the fuck to say to Kajii. He’s furious with himself for staying here in the first place. What had he been thinking?

Chuuya doesn’t know how long it’s been when he hears the door to the balcony open then shut again. Kajii comes up to next to him, offering him a plate.

“Do you want some scrambled eggs?” he asks, tone cautious.

“What the fuck?” asks Chuuya, too caught off guard to maintain his anger or shame or any of that. He looks at the plate of scrambled eggs incredulously.

“You’re clearly fucking upset,” says Kajii, now slightly angry. “And some people like food when they’re upset. And I don’t have anything else here!”

Kajii yelling at him and offering him scrambled eggs is too much. Chuuya grabs the offered plate, snorting over the ridiculousness. He eats the entire plate while Kajii watches, the other man staying unusually quiet. He stays that way even after Chuuya finishes and sets the plate down.

“What did you do before you worked for Port Mafia Records?” asks Chuuya to break the silence. He keeps his gaze on the city instead of looking at Kajii.

“Not much,” answers Kajii, not sounding surprised at the abrupt question or the subject. “I had just finished high school when I got signed. My parents were just happy I was moving out.”

“I never knew my dad, but my mom is dead,” says Chuuya, voice emotionless. He still doesn’t look at Kajii. “She didn’t die peacefully. That’s what I was dreaming about.”

“That’s fucked up,” says Kajii after a moment. “Why are you telling me this?” He sounds more confused than anything.

“Because I don’t want to ever have this conversation again,” says Chuuya, turning to give him a serious expression. “Don’t wake me up next time.”

“If that’s what you want,” says Kajii with a shrug, seemingly unbothered by his request. “I don’t remember you having this problem on tour.”

“It’s not always like this,” says Chuuya, voice full of frustration now. “It’s this fucking time of year. If I could just somehow fast forward life to June I fucking would.”

“So why don’t you?” asks Kajii, raising an eyebrow.

“What do you mean?” asks Chuuya, leaning against the railing but facing Kajii this time.

“You’re a god damn Port Mafia Records executive,” says Kajii, rolling his eyes as if the answer is obvious. “If you want to take time off, take time off. Don’t give any excuses. Just fucking do it.”

“Huh,” says Chuuya, crossing his arms. He contemplates that for a second. “See you in June then. Thanks for the eggs.” He walks towards the balcony door, giving Kajii a final look as he does.

“Later,” says Kajii, tone back to a more normal version, full of arrogance and smugness.

Chuuya rolls his eyes and doesn't say anything else, shutting the door behind him and leaving Kajii out there alone. He leaves the apartment and heads back towards his house. But he doesn't go inside when he gets there. Instead he walks out onto the beach, sitting down right next to the waves.

Realistically, he knows he can't tell the difference between the Mediterranean Sea and the Pacific Ocean, but something about it never feels quite the same. For a single second, he wishes he hadn't broken the Petrus that had held a bit of it. He dismisses the wish quickly, he's got enough to deal with right now without adding that to it.

Chuuya pulls out his phone and dials a number he hasn't called since October. He waits as it rings, knowing he isn't going to get an answer. The sound of the voice on the answering machine makes him clutch the phone tighter.

"You've reached Arthur Rimbaud," comes the deep voice through the phone. "I'm unable to take your call right now. Leave your name and number, and I will return your call shortly."

Chuuya had made the impulsive decision to move Arthur's cell phone to his personal expenses instead of canceling it back when he was in Japan. He hadn't thought about it much since then, but right now he just really fucking needs someone to talk to.

"Hey, Arthur," says Chuuya into the phone, smiling at how foolish this whole thing is, but he can't deny how much it's helping. "It's been a while. I've got a lot to catch you up on. Marseilles is just as beautiful as you said it was."

"What is your problem?" asks Taneda. His usual smile is gone, now replaced with a serious expression. His eyes are hard as he looks at Dazai.

"I don't have a problem," answers Dazai cheerfully, giving him a humongous smile. It's not even a tiny bit sincere.

"Drop the act," commands Taneda coolly. "You've been a brat for days now, and I've tried to ignore it. But it doesn't seem to be going away. So what's the issue?"

Dazai scowls, crossing his arms and staring at the ceiling of his bedroom. He's glaring at it from his spot on the bed while Taneda confronts him from the doorway. Dazai hadn't expected this, even though he *has* been a brat lately.

"Did your detective instincts tell you something is wrong?" asks Dazai with a sneer, sitting up again. "It's not enough that I'm stuck here. Now you want me to act like I'm happy about it."

“I don’t want you to act like anything, Dazai,” says Taneda, not reacting to Dazai’s attempts at a taunt. He sighs and looks at the ground. “I’m not your jailer. I’m not your anything really. I offered you a place to stay here because I thought you could use a hand getting out from under PMR’s thumb.” He looks up again at Dazai with a slight frown. “But you’re welcome to leave any time. I can help you find somewhere else to stay if that’s what you want.”

Dazai feels the fight leave him at the offer. That isn’t what he wants, it isn’t even close. What he does want is to someone go back in time and pry Chuuya out of his mother’s hands before she could sink her claws and lies into him.

But Dazai can’t tell Taneda about this. It isn’t his story to tell. Chuuya might have broken off their partnership, but Dazai would never betray his trust like that. Not about this. He would never tell another soul about it. Dazai would just have to bear with the terrible anger this time of year brings out in him in silence.

He hadn’t expected it to hit him as harshly this year with how things had dissolved between him and Chuuya. But that had somehow made it even worse. It isn’t fair that he has to sit here and practically give himself an ulcer over someone who loathes him.

But he can’t stop picture Chuuya on that beach in Chicago, the way he had said *I still can’t stop believing I’m what she told me I am* after staring at a lake by himself for hours. He can’t stop thinking about how night after night he’d had to wake Chuuya up after playing *Corruption*, how he had held him close and wished that he could have the dreams instead just for even one night to give Chuuya a break.

Dazai had never been able to do anything substantial to spare Chuuya from any of that pain, and now he can’t do anything at all. His uselessness has made him tense, and that’s why he’s been lashing out. All of these negative thoughts have left him off balance with no where to put any of his turmoil.

But there is someone more deserving of his fury than Taneda, someone who Dazai hates perhaps even more than Mori. An idea comes to him.

“That isn’t what I want,” says Dazai. He gives Taneda a searching look. “Taneda, you’re a cop. I am aware that grave desecration is a crime, but how strictly is that enforced? Can I just slightly damage someone’s grave?”

Taneda looks baffled at the change in subject. “It is very strictly enforced. Any damage at all is prosecuted.”

“I see,” says Dazai, bringing a hand under his chin. “Does verbal assault count as desecration?”

“No,” says Taneda, still looking very confused and now slightly concerned. “You can’t be arrested for verbally assaulting a grave.”

“Got it,” says Dazai, standing up and starting to wrap himself up in his going out disguise. “I have somewhere I have to be. I’ll be less bratty when I get back.”

“Do you need a ride?” asks Taneda. His brows are furrowed as he looks at Dazai, but he doesn’t question him further.

“I’ll be fine,” says Dazai, waving a hand dismissively. He quickly finishes getting ready and sets out for a graveyard across town. He uses the walk to prepare what he wants to say.

He finally reaches the grave in question and wonders how long it’s been since someone else visited it as he looks at the name, Fuku Kashimura. He highly doubts Chuuya ever comes here. And Chuuya had told him his mother hadn’t been in contact with any of their other family.

“Hello, Ms. Kashimura,” says Dazai formally. “I’m here to inform you that you are a piece of trash. Actually, I believe trash is too good for you. You are worse than garbage. I’m not sorry you’re dead. You were a stain upon this earth.”

“He deserved better than you,” continues Dazai. For once he doesn’t try to hide his emotions, he lets his anger and devastation show in full force. “You were his parent. You were supposed to protect him, not make him a weapon against himself. How could you not see how clearly very, very human he was?”

“You didn’t break him,” says Dazai, his eyes watering slightly. “He grew up to be a phenomenal singer, the best voice I’ve ever heard. The music he writes is breathtaking and a gift to listen to. Every crowd he plays for instantly loves him.”

“And he’s kind,” says Dazai softly so his voice doesn’t break. “He’s kind, and he’s caring, and he’s brave. He isn’t afraid to be honest even when it’s difficult. He’s far too loyal and he keeps foolishly putting his trust in the worst people possible, but that isn’t entirely his fault.”

“Thank you for listening,” finishes Dazai coldly. “Enjoy hell. Congratulations on earning my eternal hatred when we’ve never even met. I’ll likely see you one year from now.”

Dazai walks away, feeling a multitude of things as he does. But overall, he does feel a bit lighter. He resolves to put all of this behind him. Dazai has always been fairly good at compartmentalizing, this will just put that to the test. At the very least he’s going to be much nicer to Taneda.

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## **June, Two Years, Four Months, & One Week Since the Release of Corruption**

Chuuya comes back from his time off with a new goal. Instead of going to the office the first day of June, he goes to Kajii’s apartment instead. He knocks on the door rapidly and forcefully when he gets there, slightly impatient. He’s been stewing over the idea for days now.

“The fuck,” says Kajii as he opens the door. He glares at Chuuya. “What do you want?”

“Let me produce your album,” says Chuuya, pushing past him to enter the apartment. He doesn’t phrase it as a question.

“Did you hit the sauce too hard while you were away?” asks Kajii, clearly not agreeing to Chuuya’s semi-demand without convincing. “You’re not a producer.”

“I wasn’t a songwriter either, but I won five Grammys when I was sixteen,” says Chuuya, not faltering in his assuredness. “Let me produce your album.”

“Why?” asks Kajii, putting up his hands in obvious confusion.

Chuuya had thought about what had been different between this year and last year, what had made him go so off the rails. Arthur and Dazai’s absences had been contributing factors, but that hadn’t been the root cause. Arthur and Dazai had both helped him to feel human (well, Dazai more so than Arthur, but that’s not the fucking focus right now), but before that he’d had something else.

Even when he had been playing mediocre pop with The Sheep, the music had made him feel more settled, more like himself. Or the version of himself he wants to be. Chuuya doesn’t love who he’s become since last August, this uncreative person who sits back and does paperwork while others take the spotlight. Chuuya has never been in music for the fame but the way the songs make him feel.

He still can’t face writing an album for himself about his own life, so helping his...*friend* (and ugh, it is not easy to admit that’s what Kajii is to him now) is the next best thing. Chuuya had a blast playing with The Black Lizards after he and Kajii got over themselves. They aren’t as different when it comes to music as he’d first thought. They both have a wild streak that Tachihara and Gin have a little of but not to the same extent. Chuuya is confident that he and the Lemon Fucker know each other well enough now that they can make something really great together, even if they butt heads the entire time.

“I want to write music again,” says Chuuya calmly. He meets Kajii’s eyes with confidence. “I know I can help you can make your album great.”

“So write your own fucking album,” says Kajii, scowling at him. “Don’t piggyback on mine.”

“You’re struggling with it, aren’t you?” asks Chuuya, voice just slightly taunting. “That’s why you’re really here. You’re fucking stuck, and you don’t want to admit it.”

“Watch yourself, Baby Red,” warns Kajii darkly. He glares at Chuuya.

Chuuya doesn’t back down. “I’m right, aren’t I? But I can help you. Writing for a solo artist is different than for a band. I know how it works. And I’ve always been better at the subtleties of music than you, and you know that.”

Kajii laughs harshly. “What gives the idea that I’d want to work with you again?” he asks dismissively. “I had enough of you trying to order me around in The Black Lizards.”

“We get each other now,” says Chuuya, crossing his arms. “I’m not going to try to tame you this time. You’re still going to be in charge. But I can help you take the feelings and ideas you have and make it into something intricate and nuanced.” Chuuya smiles at Kajii despite his

visible reluctance. “We can make a fucking extraordinary album,” says Chuuya, voice almost smug. “I know that’s what you want, a number one album.”

“Hirotzu is my producer,” says Kajii hesitantly. He’s clearly at war with himself based on his facial expression.

Chuuya has to force down a smirk. He’s totally got him. “That old geezer loves me,” he says with a shrug. “I can ask him to shift it over to me easily.”

“I am in charge,” declares Kajii, pointing a finger for emphasis. “Not you. What I say goes.”

“Within reason,” agrees Chuuya, letting just a hint of a smile show.

“Within reason?” repeats Kajii with a dramatic groan. “Why the fuck am I agreeing to this? I already hate it.”

“Do you want an ego stroke or a bestseller?” asks Chuuya, now smiling fully.

“Oh, shut the fuck up with your arrogant little pitch bullshit,” says Kajii irritably, rolling his eyes. “You already know I’m going to do it. I am going to regret this. I know it.”

“Let’s get to work, Lemon Fucker,” says Chuuya, grinning widely at him. Kajii lets out another huge groan, but goes to get his sheet music.

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## **June 19, Nearly Two Years & Five Months Since the Release of Corruption**

Dazai’s nineteenth birthday passes the same as most of his other days have. He gets up, he pours himself a cup of coffee from the pot Taneda had brewed when he left at the crack of dawn that morning. He drinks the coffee while working on his latest song. He reads a bit of the book he’s started, a collection of poems called *Walking By Myself Again* (not his usual pick, but Taneda had highly recommended it.)

It’s quiet, peaceful. It’s much more pleasant than his birthday had been last year when he’d spent the entire day working. Sure, the day had had one minor bright spot, but besides that it had been rather lousy. One gift hadn’t changed that. And anyway, he’s decided that his attachment to that particular gift is misguided (he still can’t bring himself to actually throw it away, but he’s buried it in one of the drawers of his room.)

After the whirlwind year he’s had, he doesn’t scoff at a calm and uneventful birthday. Dazai had never liked celebrating his birthday much. When he’d been younger his parents had always thrown extravagant parties that were more for their friends than for Dazai. Then when he’d gotten older they’d just given him expensive presents he had no interest in. He’d kind of hated his birthday before he’d started getting songs as presents (which he is *not thinking about today*.)

So Dazai is satisfied with how he’d spent the day that night when Taneda calls him for dinner. He can smell the food before he gets in the room, grilled cheese and tomato soup



from a can (Dazai eats home-cooked food, but he's not quite sure he eats healthier than before.)

Dazai is surprised by the sight of a cake on the table though. It's covered in colorful frosting with balloons and dancing animals. He looks from the cake to Taneda and raises his eyebrows.

"Dazai," says Taneda, crossing his arms and giving him a very disapproving look (for a moment Dazai has a flashback to being on the end of a very similar look from Hirotsu). "Why did I have to find out it was your birthday from a Google alert?"

Dazai laughs a little. "I've never been a big birthday person," he says flippantly. He comes closer to inspect the cake, dipping a finger in the frosting and eating it. It's very sweet, which makes Dazai smile widely.

"I picked that up on the way home," says Taneda, frowning at Dazai when he takes another swipe of frosting with the same finger. "It was the only cake they had."

"Come on, Taneda," says Dazai, smile shifting to more of a half-smirk. "This cake totally screams nineteen."

Taneda smacks his hand when he goes for a third round of frosting. "At least humor me and eat a morsel of the actual meal I made."

"Of course, chef," says Dazai solemnly, saluting as he takes a seat at the table. He takes a huge bite of his grilled cheese to drive the point home.

Taneda snorts, dipping his own sandwich in his soup. "How was your day? Did the songwriting bug bite?" He asks Dazai this nearly every day.

"The writing was decent," answers Dazai. He's sold multiple songs since he started ghostwriting in March, but none of them have been released yet. It's frustrating not being involved in the recording process to be able to speed it up. He tries to just keep cranking out songs to curb his impatience.

"That's good," says Taneda. He never speaks much about his own work, not that Dazai asks him about it. He likes that he doesn't have to put on many acts in front of Taneda and that he doesn't expect him to fake interest in his career.

Dinner isn't that different than usual except for the giant slice of cake Dazai eats after he finishes his grilled cheese. Taneda takes a much smaller piece. But Taneda doesn't draw more attention to his birthday than that. Dazai is thoroughly relieved.

The only other thing out of the ordinary that happens is Dazai gets a text after dinner when he's back in his room and reading. His phone had rang and messages had poured in after he first left PMR, but that had died off after a while. Now he almost never gets texts, except for a couple when Taneda had stayed at work late and let he know dinner was off that night.

Dazai picks up his phone, throat a little dry. It only lasts a second, but for that single second he lets himself hope that the text is from the person who he's been actively trying not to think about all day.

The actual sender of the text is a huge surprise in a different way though. Dazai can't hold back the huge smile he gets as he reads it.

**[8:04pm Odasaku]: Happy birthday Dazai! I hope you have a great day. I miss you, but I'll see you once I get out of here. I heard that you left PMR, I'm proud of you.**

Dazai has never doubted whether he made the right decision to leave PMR, but Oda's approval makes him more secure than ever about it. He wants to be the kind of person who Oda, who tries endlessly to do good, can respect. He hadn't been that type of person before, but he's determined to be one now.

He grins as he types out his response, **Thanks Odasaku! :D**

Dazai doesn't get a reply, but he doesn't care. Once again his only worthwhile birthday presents come in a form he hadn't see coming. But a store-bought cake and text are priceless as far as he's concerned. The day doesn't have the extreme highs that his past few birthdays had had, but his nineteenth is far from crummy.

Chuuya gets through his day with little fanfare on June 19th. He's actually fairly productive. He gets through a couple phone calls, writes up some suggestions on Hakushu Kitahara's new album, and badgers Kajii into making some progress on his album.

It's been a couple weeks now, and he and Kajii are starting to get into a rhythm. Chuuya had actually been extremely impressed at the songs Kajii had showed him. They had been way deeper than what he would have expected Kajii to write on his own based on his personality. But the lyrics are filled with clever imagery and subtle brilliance. Chuuya had asked him if he was really the one who'd written them when he'd first read them. Kajii had thrown a pillow at him from his spot on the couch.

Chuuya's good mood lasts until he's alone in his house, having told (lied) to Kajii that he's a got a bunch of stuff to do tonight and can't babysit him in music or at the bar. But Chuuya's plans for the night consist of no actual work. Instead he makes himself a cup of tea and sips it while he lies on the couch in his living room, his laptop open in front of him.

It's been over four months now since Dazai had left. It's been over five months since he's spoken to him in person. That's not a short amount of time. That's over twenty weeks, over

one-hundred fifty days. That's enough time that Chuuya should feel some sort of distance from him, that he shouldn't still feel this persistent and aggravating bond between them.

As opposed to himself who had always had hoards of people bullying him into celebrating his birthday, the only person who had ever really pushed Dazai about his had been Chuuya. Chuuya doesn't want to care about whether Dazai has anyone to celebrate with today. He wants to not give a shit whether he's alright or not.

Chuuya remembers being fifteen and thinking that losing The Sheep would be a loss he would never recover from. He'd thought of his former bandmates as his family. And if he's being *very* honest with himself, he still holds a special place in his heart for those assholes, for the kids who had taken him in and given him a home in dingy basements they'd filled with lackluster songs.

Chuuya holds way more hatred for Dazai than had ever had for any of the members of The Sheep. Yet here he is, wasting his time in an idiotic display of...he actually has no idea what to call this.

Instead of spending that night doing his job or writing music or going out with Kajii, Chuuya spends it listening to Natsume Soseki and Murasaki Shikibu alone. He gives himself a break from his fury and just listens to the music that even the pickiest person he knows hadn't been able to deny was good. He's not sure what it means.

The next day he acts like nothing ever happened.

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### **July, Two Years & Five and a Half Months Since the Release of Corruption**

Chuuya isn't even really paying attention when the song starts. He has his favorite radio station on from L.A. as background noise as he attempts to clean his house. He's been letting it get slightly dingy since he's been spending so much time at Kajii's.

The album is really coming along now. Chuuya hasn't been this excited about music in forever. When they finally get a song perfect Chuuya feels on top of the world. It's just slightly less exciting than performing on stage. He had never felt this invested in Falling Camellia. Unlike then, he feels connected to this music.

Kajii actually doesn't fight him as much as he'd thought he would. He seems to trust Chuuya more than he had when they'd first collaborated (although that word doesn't feel entirely accurate, it isn't antagonistic enough.) But now he lets Chuuya try his ideas without complaining incessantly. Kajii's main focus is that they don't change the lyrics or what he calls the "atmosphere" of the song (he's still fucking crazy.)

Chuuya doesn't push him to alter any of that stuff. He concentrates on making the music flow and underscore the essence of the song instead of distracting from it. He's been playing the piano constantly again, the keys still flowing under his fingers easily. It's one of the only things his mom had given him that isn't tainted in some way, the instrument always feels right.

But it's not one of Kajii's songs that startles Chuuya while he's in the middle of clearing his living room of all the clutter that's accumulated in it. It's a song he's never heard before. Something about it just catches his attention, his ears automatically tune into it.

He doesn't move as he listens to the song in its entirety. His sense of apprehension only grows. Once it's over he pulls out his phone, quickly typing in the song's name and searching for the details about it.

It's called *Run, Melos!* and it's by an artist named Friederich Schiller. Chuuya knows of him, he'd liked his album *The Robbers* from a couple years ago. But Chuuya keeps scrolling until he gets to who is listed as the writers of the song. One name stand out in particular, Earl Mackenzie.

It takes him a second to put it together. Earl Mackenzie, erel mack, mackerel. It's a code that only Chuuya would understand. It had been a private nickname, too nonsensical to explain or use in front of anyone else. And Chuuya would recognize Dazai's songwriting anywhere, his patterns of expertly crafted harmonies and almost too perfect compositions.

Several thoughts come to him in rapid succession. The first: thank fucking shit he isn't dead in a ditch somewhere. The next: he is not going to be the one to inform Mori, he would rather rip off his fingers and never touch a piano again. Then lastly and most vehemently: *that bastard*.

Chuuya spikes his phone into the floor in rage, smashing it and sending the pieces flying. The room is even messier now. He doesn't care, possibly angrier now than he had been when he'd first left.

Dazai's first ghostwritten song *finally* comes out after months of waiting. *Run, Melos!* is partially based on an old Greek legend he'd read from Taneda's library. He'd been pleasantly surprised when Friedrich Schiller had picked it up as a single. It's been well-received so far critically and is getting decent radio play. It's not *Corruption*-level success, but that song could rot in hell as far as Dazai is concerned.

"I think I like it," says Taneda, who Dazai is playing the song for. Although he doesn't place much stock in Taneda's taste in music, especially if it's anything like his peculiar taste in books. "I'm not sure I understand all of it."

"Music is in the eye of the beholder," says Dazai, with a shrug. He's smiling though. "Or the ear of the beholder rather."

Taneda laughs at the joke (and that gives Dazai the rather horrible concern that Taneda's terrible sense of humor is rubbing off on him.) "Good work, kid. Nice to know you're good for something besides mooching off me."

"Very supportive, Taneda," says Dazai cheerily, pressing pause on his phone. Friedrich's voice cuts off in the outro.

"You can call me Santoka, you know," says Taneda, surprising him. Dazai looks up at him to see Taneda grinning at him. The expression is completely sincere. "Only my detectives at work call me Taneda."

"I don't like to be called Osamu," says Dazai slowly. "Not by anyone."

"That's not what I meant," says Taneda, or...Santoka. He shakes his head, but his eyes are still kind as they meet Dazai's. The look makes something in Dazai falter.

"My birth name was Osamu Tsushima," says Dazai, a name he hasn't spoken since he was fourteen. He doesn't add the rest of the story, how the name Osamu makes him think of his parents. How Dazai is the name he'd chosen, the name he thinks of as his own.

Dazai had never considered telling Odasaku this, his most loyal friend. Or Chuuya, his... actually choosing a descriptor for Chuuya is something he has no interest in.

And Santoka Taneda isn't his friend. Dazai doesn't talk to him like a friend. But Dazai knows without any doubt that he'll keep this information to himself. Perhaps that's why Dazai had felt he could tell him.

"Dazai suits you better anyway," says Santoka easily.

The smile Dazai gives him in response is possibly one of the most honest he's ever given.

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### **August, Two Years, Six Months, & Two Weeks Since the Release of Corruption**

The feeling Chuuya gets as he steps out of the PMR plane in L.A. is amazing. He's *home*. It feels like it's been a lifetime since he's been back. The sound of the city around him is better than any music he can think of right now. Chuuya can't hold back the huge grin on his face as he walks down the steps.

"Why is it so bright here?" asks Kajii from behind him, voice slightly hoarse.

Kajii had decided to spend their last night in Marseilles "going out with a bang." He'd called Chuuya lame when he'd stayed home to pack up all his stuff. Chuuya had felt very vindicated about his choice when Kajii had shown up for their flight with an awful hangover and was still in a crabby mood after a twelve and a half hour plane ride.

Chuuya had spent the trip finalizing their recording schedule for Kajii's album, *The Literary City* (which Kajii had picked the title for, Chuuya still sucks at coming up with them). All the writing is pretty much finished. There's just some final tweaks to be made, and they can sound those out better while recording anyway.

Mori has been very supportive of the project the entire time since Chuuya told him about it. He's arranged for them have all the studio time they need immediately. He's even been lightening Chuuya's other workload so he can devote more of his time to it. It seems like Mori is less displeased with Chuuya for refusing to do his own album as long as this one turns out well. Not that Mori has ever voiced that out loud.

Hirotsu's reaction to Chuuya taking over the album had been more dumbstruck. His exact words when Chuuya had asked had been, "Is this a prank?" He hadn't believed Chuuya and Kajii would be willingly working together. But he'd given up his role of his producer with little argument. He still checks on their progress once in a while though, and Chuuya is happy to bounce ideas off him.

Kouyou, meanwhile, thinks Chuuya is wasting his talent on someone who doesn't deserve it. She's never hid her scorn for Motojiro Kajii. Chuuya doesn't blame her, he had used to share that scorn. She still makes snippy comments about him whenever Chuuya talks to her. But she has been fully supportive of Chuuya getting back into being directly involved in music, she just thinks he should choose a different recipient.

Maybe if Kajii hadn't been right in front of his face when he was practically bursting with the need to make something he wouldn't have picked him. But Chuuya doesn't regret his decision, he's excited about this music in a way he never had been with The Black Lizards. It feels like he's poured more of himself into it.

Chuuya goes straight to the office rather than to his dorm, letting some random PMR employee handle taking his stuff there. Kajii skips out to go sleep, and Chuuya mocks him and calls him a baby as they part ways.

Walking into the Port Mafia Records' office feels even better than getting off the plane had. As opposed to his time in France, there practically isn't a person that he passes who doesn't talk to him. He's swamped with welcomes and greetings. It takes him almost an hour before he makes it up to the executive suite. Chuuya is sure it would have taken even longer if The Black Lizards weren't stuck in a practice session.

But instead of walking towards Kinoshita's old office (Chuuya hasn't been in it enough to think of it as his own), he knocks on a different door. Kouyou immediately calls for him to come in.

Chuuya opens the door with probably a little too much enthusiasm, he barely stops it from crashing into the wall. He's too excited though. Kouyou watches from her spot behind her desk, arms crossed.

"If you had taken any longer our tea would have gone cold," are Kouyou's first words to him after not seeing him for seven months.

Chuuya snorts and walks across the room to greet her properly. He and Kouyou aren't very physically affectionate people, but Chuuya wraps her up in a hug anyway. She gives him a small squeeze back before pushing him away.

Chuuya takes a seat across the desk from her, picking up the cup of tea in front of him. Kouyou's office isn't the same one he'd spent so much time in when he was fifteen, but the layout is practically identical. The room is just a little bigger, and there's a better view out the windows. Chuuya hadn't known it was possible to be homesick for an office until this moment.

"Where's your musical parasite?" asks Kouyou, drinking her own tea. Her tone is somewhere between amused and demeaning.

Chuuya shakes his head, catching himself before he rolls his eyes (he hasn't had to use Kouyou-level manners in a while.) "Kajii will be in tomorrow. Not everyone can bounce back from international travel that fast."

"Anyone with proper self-control can," says Kouyou mildly. But then she switches to a more neutral tone. "You're set to start recording soon then?"

"Tomorrow, actually," says Chuuya, glad to not have to talk about Kajii further. He finds Kouyou's barbs funny for the most part, but he's also rather proud of the music they've made. He doesn't like when Kouyou puts it down.

"It's good that you're back," says Kouyou, just a small smile showing. "It was way too quiet around here. The only person I've had to converse with who isn't an idiot is Mori."

Chuuya almost chokes on his tea. Kouyou has never been that complementary of the boss before. "You've been conversing with Mori?" he asks cautiously.

"I didn't exactly have a choice what with you gone and Dazai having vanished," says Kouyou. Chuuya is almost surprised enough that the name barely makes him flinch. "I certainly wasn't going to talk to *Ace*."

"So you've made peace then?" asks Chuuya, disbelief clear in his voice. "With the boss?"

"No," says Kouyou shortly, her mouth in a thin line. "Peace isn't the word I'd use. He's still much too devious for me to be completely at ease around him."

"But," continues Kouyou after a moment, sighing, "Perhaps my previous dismissals of him were from a rather short-sighted point of view. It isn't easy to spearhead one of the biggest record companies in the world, and Mori's craftiness is unmatched. I've had to work fairly closely with him these past months, and it's been an illuminating experience."

"You respect him now," says Chuuya, still shocked at this turn of events.

Kouyou's frown becomes more pronounced. "Yes," she says the word with almost revulsion. "Let's talk about something less taxing before I kick you out to get some work done. Some of us executives don't get a free pass to goof off in Marseilles for half a year."

"I made long-lasting relationships with many people in the music industry while I was there," protests Chuuya. He'd cross his arms if he wasn't holding his teacup with one of his hands.

“I might not be as popular as you around PMR, but I do hear things,” says Kouyou, raising her eyebrows. “I know how you’ve been spending your evenings.”

Chuuya is open to discussing many things with Kouyou, but his escapades in Europe are not included in those things.

He finishes off the rest of his tea in a long gulp. “Anyway, thanks for the tea, Kouyou,” says Chuuya quickly. “Great to see you. I’ll let you get back to work.”

Kouyou actually laughs out loud at his attempt to escape. “Welcome home, Chuuya,” says Kouyou warmly.

“Thanks,” says Chuuya, smirking at her as he leaves the office. He then heads to his own office. The air feels slightly stale when he opens the door. No one has obviously been in here for a long time.

Chuuya pulls out his phone and sends an email requesting someone clean the place a bit at the earliest opportunity. One of the perks of being back in L.A. is he now has access to things like that again. Although he is going to miss Simone. It had been nice having someone attempt to keep his schedule in order for him and answer the calls he didn’t want to take.

Chuuya moves over to his desk, the one Kinoshita had left behind. Chuuya hadn’t tried to change anything since he’d left. He’d accepted his promotion without thinking much about all the things it came with. Chuuya hadn’t even had an office before. He had just been one of PMR’s musicians, he hadn’t needed one.

He’s got ideas for this place. Chuuya hadn’t spoken to Kinoshita much, but his decor leaves much to be desired. His first order of business after getting rid of all the dust is getting a piano in here somehow. Next will be less old and stiff furniture. The desk chair looks about as comfortable as sitting against sandpaper.

Chuuya is debating other changes when his door opens, surprising him. This floor is only accessible by an executive keycard or permission. But the person who enters has more access to all of PMR besides only Mori.

“Chuuya,” Elise practically shrieks, half-running towards him.

“Hey, kiddo,” says Chuuya with a huge smile, catching her as she jumps into his arms. He’s disturbed to find out that at thirteen she’s just a couple inches shorter than him now. Chuuya has pretty much accepted the fact that he’s going to be on the short side, but that doesn’t mean he appreciates people way younger than him literally looking down on him.

“Oh my god,” says Elise as she lets go of him. She doesn’t move far though, and she takes both his hands in hers. “I have so much to tell you! I can’t believe you were gone so long. It’s been so boring without you. Never leave for that long again.” The last sentence comes out almost as a command.

Chuuya laughs. “I go where they tell me. How about we do lunch tomorrow? Just you and me?”



“That sounds perfect,” says Elise happily, squeezing his hands a bit too tightly. She thankfully lets go of them then. Her expression becomes more serious. “I missed you.”

“Yeah, I missed you too,” says Chuuya, smiling at her. He’s had a major soft spot for her for years now. He knows almost no one else at PMR treats her like her own person or like the kid she is. He’d felt a little guilty every time they’d talked when he was in Marseilles and he’d asked her what was new and she didn’t have much to say.

“I have something to tell you,” says Elise, lowering her voice. “But you can’t tell anyone else, not even Mori.”

“What?” asks Chuuya, slightly nervous but mostly intrigued.

“I quit playing the piano,” confesses Elise quietly with a troubled look on her face. “I’m not very good at it, and I don’t really like it.”

Chuuya tries not to burst out in laughter because she’s so obviously distressed, but he can’t help it. “You say it like you’ve committed a crime,” he says in between his laughter.

Elise pouts at him, throwing up her hands in frustration. “You’re all so musically talented! That’s what people respect around here. No one is going to take me seriously if I can’t even play a single instrument.”

“Elise,” says Chuuya, shaking his head, getting his laughter under control to be more sincere. “No one gives a shit if you can play music or not. People will respect you if you act worthy of that respect, even if you can’t play a thing.”

“Nobody respects Ace,” says Elise, though she looks a little less upset.

“That’s because Ace is a jackass,” says Chuuya dismissively. He wonders if he should be swearing this much in front of her, but he’d already been saying much worse when he was her age.

Elise smiles then, looking very relieved. “Thanks, Chuuya,” she says earnestly (and shit, she is growing up if she’s that genuinely worried about losing people’s respect over musical ability). “I’ll let you get settled in. Mori told me not to bother you, but I couldn’t wait.”

“Screw what he says,” says Chuuya with a smirk. “Bother me anytime you want.”

She surprises him by hugging him again. “I’m happy you’re back,” she whispers as she practically crushes him.

“Yeah, me too,” replies Chuuya, ruffling her hair like he used to when she was much smaller.

She pushes him away and scowls at him, so she clearly isn’t *that* grown up. “Soon enough you’re not going to be able to even reach my hair,” says Elise snootily.

Chuuya rolls his eyes. “What were you saying about leaving me to get settled?”

Elise snickers and walks towards the door. But she turns back one more time before she leaves. “Lunch tomorrow?” she asks.

“Lunch tomorrow,” confirms Chuuya.

She gives him another huge smile then exits the office. Chuuya smiles to himself as he watches her go. So much has changed over the past year, but one thing has remained constant. Port Mafia Records is still the place that makes him feel like he belongs, regardless of how a couple of people were no longer there.

Chuuya finishes up his inspection of his office before deciding to head back to his dorm, putting the rest off until tomorrow. He’s a bit jet-lagged too even though he’d mocked Kajii about it. Plus he’d rather deal with it after the cleaning crew had come by.

He makes his way to the dorm building a couple doors down from the office, oddly nostalgic as he takes the stairs up to the third floor and reaches the door at the end of the hall. Chuuya fishes out his keys and unlocks the door, walking into the place.

It’s like being immediately transported back to being sixteen. The memories are all over. Everywhere he looks reminds him of Dazai, of Double Black, of long days and nights spent crafting music together. It’s the couch Dazai always slept on. It’s the console he’d challenged him to game after game on. It’s the fucking coffee pot that Dazai had left here and Chuuya had never returned.

Holy fucking shit, he needs to move. Immediately.

Dazai is lying on his bed struggling with a stubborn chorus when Santoka knocks on his door, opening it halfway when Dazai says he can enter. This isn’t surprising. What’s surprising is what Santoka says.

“You have a guest.”

Dazai practically flings his laptop off his lap. “I can’t have a guest,” he says flatly. “Nobody is supposed to know I’m here.”

Santoka opens the door the rest of the way to reveal this mystery visitor. He looks different than the last time Dazai had seen him. His red hair is longer, and he’s dressed in jeans and a t-shirt instead of his usual more formal attire.

“Long time no see, Dazai,” says Sakunosuke Oda from his spot leaning against the doorway. His smile is the same though, genuine and kindhearted.

“Odasaku?” asks Dazai, getting up off the bed and coming forward, not quite believing his eyes. “How did you even know I was here?”

Oda sighs. “Ango told me.”

Dazai stops moving closer to Oda. “You’re speaking to that scumbag?” asks Dazai, voice going hard without him deciding.

Oda’s smile turns sad. “Not very often. He keeps avoiding me.”

Dazai takes that in, frowning at his friend. But he doesn’t want to fight with Oda, not when he’s finally seeing him after so long.

“So you’ve finished the recovery program?” asks Dazai, trying to change the subject.

“I’ve finished the part where I had to live there,” says Oda with a shrug. There’s a heaviness to his words that he’d never spoken with before. “I’ve still got a long way to go. I’m actually staying with a family friend a little bit outside the city. L.A. is still a little much for me, too many bad memories.”

“The kids?” asks Dazai hesitantly, not really wanting to know but having to anyway.

“They all went to good homes with responsible guardians,” says Oda, voice a little thick. “It’s what’s best for them. Their new families have been kind enough to let me exchange letters with them.”

Dazai has other questions, but he really doesn’t want to put Odasaku through any further pain. He never wants to cause Oda suffering again.

“You look different,” says Dazai instead. “Very Cali slacker.”

“You should talk,” says Oda, gesturing to his own outfit of sweatpants and an old t-shirt that had been Santoka’s. His smile is lighter now. “I’ve never seen you in anything other than a suit. Or without dark circles under your eyes.”

“He still barely sleeps,” says Santoka disapprovingly, reminding Dazai that he’s still standing there. “I hear him in the middle of the night banging around.”

It’s an odd feeling to be in a room with the two of them, the people who for some reason keep putting their faith in Dazai even when he gives them reasons not to. It’s like two parts of his life he’d never would have thought would fit together.

“Did Taneda introduce himself?” asks Dazai to Oda.

“Of course I did,” says Santoka, rolling his eyes. “I’m an excellent host.”

“You never have guests over,” points out Dazai.

“I’m busy,” says Santoka flippantly. “And I’m housing a fugitive record company executive.”

Oda laughs, causing them both to look at him. “It sounds like you’re taking good care of him,” says Oda lightly.

“I am an adult,” Dazai reminds them, crossing his arms.

Oda and Santoka both laugh at that. Dazai scowls at them.

“I’ll make us something to drink,” says Santoka, leaving them alone to walk to the kitchen.

“He’s just going to pour some powder in water,” Dazai informs Oda. “It tastes nothing like real lemonade.

“It’s good to see you, Dazai,” replies Oda, a huge grin on his face.

Dazai returns it. “You too, Odasaku.” He really, really means it.

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### **October, Two Years, Eight and a Half Months Since the Release of Corruption**

Chuuya’s barely had a break since he got home. He and Kajii spend practically every waking minute (and a lot of time they shouldn’t be awake) working on the album. But after months of hard work and a couple of close calls where Chuuya had almost smashed a guitar over his head and quit the project all together, it’s finally almost fucking done. They’re set to release in November.

Now that their part is mostly over, Chuuya has enough time to start being nervous. He’d talked a big game about how well this album was doing to do, but releasing music always makes him a little anxious. He feels like he’s throwing a piece of his soul to the public for their judgement every time. He’d thought with more experience that would go away. It hasn’t though.

Chuuya’s been so busy that the anniversary of Arthur’s death almost creeps up on him. One day it’s August and he’s in the recording studio and then the next thing he knows it’s October and it’s been a year since the man Chuuya had revered so much had passed. It kind of feels disrespectful in a way that he hadn’t paid more attention to it.

It still hurts, but the pain isn’t as all consuming as it had been a year ago. This time around he doesn’t run from his life or music. He bears the hurt with dignity, he doesn’t let it crush him.

That doesn’t mean it doesn’t completely fucking suck the day of. Chuuya shuts himself up in his office to mourn in solitude. It works until Tachihara comes to see him to whine about Akutagawa and his latest indiscretion.

At first it had been a nice distraction. But instead of leaving after he’d finished complaining, Tachihara is now lingering and poking through Chuuya’s stuff.

“What the hell is this?” asks Tachihara, picking up an object from Chuuya’s shelves.

“It’s half a Grammy,” says Chuuya, impatience clear in his voice.

“It’s what?” Tachihara holds up the award to inspect it more closely. “What the fuck did you do to it?”

“Me and Dazai split them,” says Chuuya shortly. It had been Chuuya’s idea. Instead of trying to figure out how to divide five of them between them, Chuuya had brought them to someone with a laser who split them all into equal pieces.

It had seemed funny at the time. Dazai had made a hilarious face when he’d given him his halves.

Now it’s just a stinging physical reminder of how stupid a duo looks when the other person leaves.

“Do you have any idea how much this thing is worth?” asks Tachihara, still shocked at the destruction of the Grammy.

“I’ll get another one eventually,” says Chuuya flippantly. He’s not even really kidding.

Tachihara shakes his head but puts it back down. Then he moves down to another shelf to inspect that one.

“Tachihara,” snaps Chuuya, losing his hold on his temper. “Why are you fucking hovering?”

Tachihara turns to look at him with an oddly severe expression. “Did you really think I’d fucking forget after what happened last year?”

Chuuya’s anger fades instantly. He lets out a long sigh. “I’m fine, Mich.”

“You’re one of my best fucking friends, man,” says Tachihara, tone serious in a way Chuuya rarely hears from him. “You’re like family.” He pauses, his next sentence full of frustration. “I failed you last year.”

“What?” asks Chuuya, shocked. “That is not what happened.”

“I did jack shit and had to call fucking Dazai because I couldn’t handle it,” says Tachihara angrily. “I fucked up.”

“That wasn’t your fault,” says Chuuya, trying not to get upset himself. He takes a deep breath, knowing his next words are what Tachihara needs to hear.

“I was on a mission to self-destruct that night,” says Chuuya, forcing himself to keep going. “You did the right thing, calling Dazai. It was what I needed.” The admission burns him, but he owes Tachihara this honesty.

Tachihara’s body loses some of its tension. But he still doesn’t let the subject go.

“I can do better this time,” says Tachihara, more earnest than angry now. “I swear. We don’t have to talk or anything, but you don’t have to be alone.”

The sincerity and urgency of the offer surprises Chuuya. He hadn't expected this from the brash and easygoing Tachihara. They've always been close, but Tachihara has never been this pushy with him before. They usually stick to discussing music and bitching about everyone else at PMR, they tended to stray away from the heavier things.

But Tachihara doesn't back down even when Chuuya takes a while to respond. He keeps looking at Chuuya with an expectant expression.

"You want to go to the beach?" asks Chuuya eventually.

"Um," says Tachihara, clearly not expecting that as an answer. "Now?"

"You want to help?" asks Chuuya, smirking slightly. "This is how."

"Let's go then," says Tachihara. He's still obviously confused but smiles back as if he isn't.

Tachihara doesn't question him any further. He follows along as Chuuya leads them to a spot on a stretch of beach they have to themselves. It's not a clear night, and the ocean is a little harder to make out. But Chuuya doesn't care as he digs his feet into the sand, the music of Paul Verlaine playing out from his phone.

"Is this French?" asks Tachihara from beside him. The question is curious rather than judgmental.

"Yup," answers Chuuya lightly. "Arthur's favorite singer."

Tachihara nods, looking contemplative. "What's he singing about?"

"Love, death, the usual bullshit," says Chuuya, laughing slightly. "Sometimes he uses a lot of fancy metaphors to talk about drugs and delirium."

"A rebel," says Tachihara approvingly. "Hell yeah old dead French dude."

"Last year was...unfortunate," says Chuuya, looking at the ocean instead of Tachihara. "I was a real shitbag. It got out of hand. You don't have to worry about it happening again."

"I don't care about that," says Tachihara. "If it happens, it happens. Everyone is allowed to go a little off the rails sometimes. But you should let people help when it does."

"Noted," says Chuuya, smiling a bit.

It doesn't take away the pain of missing Arthur, but it helps. It helps more than Chuuya had thought it would. Even if Tachihara doesn't get exactly who Arthur was to him, it's nice to have him here. He keeps up his colorful commentary as Chuuya plays more of the music Arthur had liked. It keeps Chuuya from getting too melancholic.

Eventually when it starts to get late Chuuya calls it a night, telling Tachihara that he'd done his duty and to stop pestering him.

“You’re welcome,” says Tachihara smugly. It’s a relief for him to be acting more like himself again.

“Fuck off,” says Chuuya as a goodbye. He flips Tachihara off with a smile as he leaves to walk back to the dorm building.

He takes the elevator to the top floor when he gets there. His door has a key code rather than a regular lock, and he punches that in to open it. Dorm isn’t really a good word for the large space he calls home now.

The layout isn’t all that different though. The biggest change is that his piano is now in the front room and he actually has a decent sized bedroom. The bathroom is also a major upgrade (Chuuya keeps the dartboard he’d used to have on the back of the door stashed in one of his closets instead now after he hadn’t been able to toss it.)

Chuuya makes himself a cup of tea, intending to drink it and go to bed. But instead of going to sleep he takes a seat at the piano. There’s a melody scratching at his brain that isn’t related to *Arahbaki* for once. He works on the song for the rest of the night, never going to sleep.

The next morning he stashes it in a drawer with all his other unfinished songs (mostly old Double Black ideas) in his bedroom. It’s still just a verse and some chords, and the thought of forcing himself to finish it right now is daunting. The longer he’d sat at the piano, the more he’d been tempted to write about other things, much less pleasant things (*a god of calamity* repeats his mind incessantly). He really has never been able to lie to himself when it comes to music.

Chuuya sighs and makes himself another cup of tea, the kind with the most caffeine he has. Fuck, it’s going to be a long day.

He’s tired enough that he can’t fight off his thoughts from straying to Dazai. It’s hard to maintain his fury at him when he’s caught up in the memory of how he’d literally sang himself hoarse a year ago for him. Dazai had even taken off his bandages, something Chuuya had never seen him do before. Sometimes Chuuya thinks about those scars on his arms and feels sick about whatever had happened that Dazai had ended up with them.

Chuuya rubs his eyes wearily. It isn’t often that he allows himself to miss Dazai more than he loathes him. Mostly because it always leaves him feeling like shit. In the end, it’s always the same. Dazai gone, Chuuya here, Soukoku finished.

But the ending hadn’t wiped away all the memories that had come before it. The night he’d learned Dazai had left PMR hadn’t replaced all the times they’d shared a stage together. It didn’t erase every night Dazai had waken him up from his nightmares and comforted him so effortlessly. It didn’t make him forget the feeling he’d gotten writing a song together, when their eyes would meet and they’d just *know* what the other was thinking.

It’s the worst part about this entire thing. Chuuya truly wishes the only thing he felt towards Dazai is a cold and indifferent hatred. It would make things so much easier.

It’s frankly exhausting that he’s still in love with him.

But Chuuya has learned *something* this past year. He knows how to not let loss demolish his entire life. Chuuya knows that hiding from music is the worst possible response to pain, that it only makes everything worse.

So Chuuya takes his tea to go and walks towards the Port Mafia Records' office without any hesitation.

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## **November, Two Years, Nine Months, & One Week Since the Release of Corruption**

### **The Literary City, Motojiro Kajii**

1. *In a Castle Town*
2. *Winter Days*
3. *The Carefree Patient*
4. *Mire*
5. *After a Snowfall*
6. *Instrumental Hallucinations, A Musical Derangement*
7. *The Story of the Bamboo Pipe*
8. *Scroll of Darkness*
9. *Mating*
10. *Songs of Upbringing*
11. *The Truth like a Contradiction*
12. *Aesculus*
13. *Beneath the Cherry Trees*

The album launch party for The Literary City is over the top even by Chuuya's standards after years of attending extravagant Port Mafia Records' events. PMR had rented out one of the upscale bars near the office, and practically everyone from PMR and a bunch of other music industry people are here celebrating (and taking advantage of the open bar.)

Chuuya himself is drinking a vodka red bull more for the caffeine boost than the alcohol. He pretty much hadn't slept the night before. He'd been too full of nervous energy. Instead he'd lied awake and listened to the album again to look for things they'd missed. It probably hadn't been a healthy way to deal with his nerves, but Chuuya has never claimed to have sensible reactions to stress.

His adrenaline has been too high all day for him to be too tired though. The reviews are in, and Motojiro Kajii has a fucking hit on his hands. Or he has one critically so far, it's too early to tell commercially. Chuuya's favorite review had started out with, "Is this the same Motojiro Kajii from The Black Lizards who had been borderline unlistenable to? What happened to that obnoxious singer to transform into this mature lyrical genius?" Kajii hadn't been offended, he'd cackled when Chuuya had read it to him.

Kajii is the life of this party. He's more happy than Chuuya has ever seen him, and more frenzied. One second he's dancing on a table, the next he's at the bar doing shots, and then occasionally he'll perform one of the songs off the album. His inebriation doesn't seem to be affecting his singing either, he's more alive on stage than ever.



Chuuya is feeling pretty content himself. There had been a tiny voice in the back of his mind that had doubted whether he could pull this off. He'd never pictured himself as a producer. (The tiny voice had also questioned whether he could make anything great without Dazai by his side.)

Okay, so the satisfaction isn't *as* great as what he'd felt about Double Black. The praise over the album is mostly going to go to Kajii, and he deserves it. Most people didn't pay close attention to the producers of an album, especially the general public. Chuuya's role in creating the music would probably go unnoticed by most people.

Still, it's hard not to feel good listening to Kajii belt out "*There are dead bodies buried under the cherry trees! It's true, I swear. How else would the trees blossom like this?*" to a highly enthusiastic crowd. Kajii seeks him out as he performs, winking at him. Chuuya rolls his eyes in response. It makes Kajii's smirk grow even wider.

"I'm glad the success isn't going to his head," says Gin, appearing beside him. Instead of dressing up like most people around them she's wearing her usual attire of long black clothing. It is technically a dress though, and her hair is down for once.

"He wasn't exactly humble to start with," points out Chuuya with a snort. "Where's Tachihara?"

"I'm not his keeper," says Gin flatly. She takes a sip from her very pink drink. Chuuya wrinkles his nose just imagining the overly sweet taste.

Chuuya gives her an unimpressed look.

"He's probably with his usual cronies by the bar," answers Gin sulkily.

"Is your brother here?" asks Chuuya, looking around them for the sight of the younger Akutagawa. He usually sticks pretty close to Gin at things like this, he isn't a very outgoing person.

"He's supposed to be," says Gin, her tone very clearly disapproving of his absence. One didn't easily tell Ryuunosuke Akutagawa what to do though.

"Nobody would probably notice if you ditched either," says Chuuya in a low voice.

Gin rolls her eyes. "We're here to support Kajii."

Chuuya grins widely at her loyalty, especially with how much she obviously doesn't want to be here. "Well, let me buy you a drink."

"From the open bar? My hero," she says sarcastically. But she walks along with him to the bar.

As they get closer they see Tachihara with his friends. He waves frantically when he sees them.

"Chuuya," he calls out. "Lady Lizard! Come join us."

“Lady Lizard?” asks Chuuya to Gin quietly, not hiding his laughter very well.

“He’s *asking* to die,” Gin replies darkly. She scowls at Tachihara as she approaches him, stomping on his foot with her high heeled one immediately.

Chuuya chuckles to himself, walking up to the bar and ordering himself a glass of wine and Gin another pink concoction. One of Tachihara’s friend crew approaches him while he waits.

“As I live and breathe,” says Charles Dickens dramatically. “Chuuya Nakahara in the flesh.”

“Hey, Charlie,” says Chuuya warmly. “It’s been a while.”

“It’s been an eternity,” says Charlie, lips upturned in a slight smirk. “It’s good to have you back in L.A. It’s dull without our resident hotheaded redhead.”

“Isn’t that Tachihara?” asks Chuuya with a smile. He grabs his drink and Gin’s, leading them over to where she’s still glaring at Tachihara and passing it to her.

“It is actually good to see you though,” says Charlie, his smile more genuine.

“Congratulations on Great Expectations,” says Chuuya. Charlie’s latest album has been doing extremely well, and Chuuya had been pretty impressed by it. “I really liked it. You deserve all the hype it’s getting.”

“Thank you,” says Charlie. He gestures around them. “You should be proud too. You were the main producer for Kajii, right?”

“I was,” says Chuuya, surprised Charlie had known that.

“You and I should get together sometime soon,” says Charlie, just a hint of nerves visible. “Talk music.”

Charlie has always been a little flirty with Chuuya, but in the past Chuuya had always brushed him off gently. His mind had been thoroughly occupied with someone, he had no interest in anyone else.

But now, things are different. Chuuya had been way more restrained than Kajii, but he hadn’t exactly been a saint those last couple months in Europe. He’d had his share of liaisons (even if the first couple times he had to keep reminding himself that it was not possible to be unfaithful to someone he had *never even dated*.) Although he’d never really seen anyone seriously.

He does like Charlie. He’s nice, and he’s a lot of fun. He’s also undeniably attractive with messy curly brown hair and blue-green eyes. They’ve always gotten along well.

There really isn’t a reason he should say no (beyond an absolutely pathetic one he is not willing to acknowledge).

“Sure,” says Chuuya, smiling in a different way at Charlie. “Sounds like fun.”

Dazai is mostly just confused the first time he listens to The Literary City. He hasn't been keeping very close track of Port Mafia Records' releases since he'd left, he'd preferred the distance. But it kept coming up on the radio, so Dazai had decided to check it out due to professional curiosity more than anything.

At first he thinks it's some sort of mistake. Surely Motojiro Kajii, The Lemon Fucker, couldn't be responsible for this music. It doesn't make sense until he looks further into the details about the album and sees Chuuya's name listed as the first producer.

Then it all clicks into place. Chuuya had been the one to take Kajii's ideas and enhance them into something more substantial. Kajii's influence on the sound is very present, and that's why Dazai hadn't put it together that it was Chuuya immediately. The songs aren't purely in his style, he would have been able to identify a song Chuuya had written himself easily. He hadn't unlearned his songwriting language, it still lives in Dazai's head.

For some reason, it gets underneath Dazai's skin, Chuuya writing music with someone else. And with fucking Kajii of all people, who Dazai had listened to *hours* of complaints about. It's like a slap in the face. If nothing else had meant anything between them, songwriting had always been sacred in a way.

Clearly Chuuya didn't feel that way anymore if he's writing with just anybody now. It makes Dazai more upset than he'd expected. He doesn't know why he'd thought Chuuya wouldn't start working with someone else after he'd left, but he hadn't. It had never even crossed his mind.

Still, personal feelings notwithstanding, he listens to the album in its entirety. Dazai's opinion of Chuuya hasn't changed how Dazai feels about the music he makes.

Music that people connect with, that makes them feel something, that's what Chuuya had always wanted to write. Chuuya pulls it off with ease, as per usual.

Okay, so Dazai actually ends up listening to it more than once (while he's alone and when no one else can hear him). It still pales in comparison to Double Black, but Dazai can't deny that it's genuinely good music.

But if anyone ever asks him about it he's going to say it's drowning in metaphors and the compositions could use some sharpening.

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## January, Almost Three Years Since the Release of Corruption

"So you're really not coming?" asks Charlie through the phone, whining just the slightest bit

Chuuya barely holds back the annoyed sigh he wants to let out. "I sat through that snooze-fest once. That was enough for me."

"That snooze-fest is one of the most prestigious award shows in music," says Charlie. "You only think it's boring because you've already won a million Grammys."

"Five is hardly a million," says Chuuya, more amused than irritated this time.

Chuuya had never intended to attend the Grammys this year. He'd skipped out last year when he'd been in Marseilles. He'd planned to do the same this year, it's not like he was nominated for anything anyway. Kajii's album wouldn't even be eligible until next year.

And beyond all that, the award show is steeped in way too much baggage for Chuuya. It had been the last place he'd ever performed with Dazai. He hadn't even fucking known it at the time. Their last time singing together and it had been for a bunch of industry bigwigs and had been *Corruption* of all songs. It's both depressing and kind of fitting.

So Chuuya has negative desire to step anywhere near the place. Dating Charles Dickens hadn't changed his mind, even if Great Expectations is up for a couple awards tonight.

It's different than he'd thought it be having a boyfriend. The press are more obsessed with him than they have been in years. They're constantly photographed and asked about the other.

The thing is there isn't even that much to tell. After starting to date after the launch party in November, they'd really only gotten to see each other a couple times a week with both of them having jam-packed schedules. Since Kajii's album had come out Chuuya has taken on a producer role for a bunch of different albums, although none where he's as extensively involved as he had been with Kajii's.

Chuuya does have a lot of fun when he does get to see Charlie. Charlie likes to go out and do things, which is different from Chuuya's usual lifestyle of working until he drops and then blowing off steam in whatever way sounds most appealing. But together the two of them go to a bunch of restaurants and bars. Charlie has also dragged him to different parks and even the Santa Monica Pier once.

It's never boring, that's for sure. Because of the dates and because of Charlie himself. He tends to have a flair for the dramatic. He's generally a pretty laid-back guy, but he does tend to get a little emotional about things.

For instance, Chuuya's refusal to go a pointless award show with him where they probably wouldn't even get to talk to each other much anyway. And Chuuya has no interest in going just for the photo-op. He hasn't enjoyed the extra spotlight on his life. He's fine with the attention he gets about his music, but he is completely uninterested in sharing his personal life, including who he's dating.

The people in his life have had multiple reactions to him dating Charlie. Tachihara had been mostly confused.

“Charlie?” he’d asked in disbelief when Chuuya had told him while they were eating lunch together along with Gin in Chuuya’s office. “You’re dating *Chuck*?”

“Yeah?” Chuuya had said, a little offended at his attitude. “What’s wrong with that? You’ve been friends with him forever.”

“Yeah, but he’s *so...*,” Tachihara had paused, searching for the right word, waving a hand, “*Charlie*.”

“Fuck off,” Chuuya had said, rolling his eyes.

Gin had stayed silent on the matter, but that was par for the course with her.

Kajii had called him from The Literary City tour and mocked him about it for twenty minutes then congratulated him on landing a hottie for a boy toy. Chuuya had threatened to give him a black eye the next time he saw him. But it’s hard to stay mad at Kajii when the album they’d made together *had* hit number one and Kajii is so full of violent joy about it. He’s more of a freaking maniac than ever.

Kouyou had only said, “I’m not sure that’s a good idea.” Chuuya had gotten pissed off, and they hadn’t talked about it much since. She makes some subtly disapproving faces though.

Elise is the only one who’s truly been ecstatic. She constantly badgers Chuuya about it, asking him about where they went and how it was. She thinks it’s a lot more thrilling than it really is. Chuuya tries to remind himself she’s just a teenage girl and not to tell her to shut up.

Mori’s reaction is the one that still makes Chuuya a little uncomfortable whenever he thinks about it. He had asked to Chuuya to come see him in his office to talk about his thoughts on Sakutaro Hagiwara’s album in progress *Howling at the Moon* then brought it up right before he left.

“It’s come to my attention that you’re now dating Charles Dickens,” Mori had said, cheerful smile in full force. “Make sure it doesn’t affect Port Mafia Records in any way and we’ll never have to discuss it any further.”

Chuuya had agreed with the plan, but it had still been extremely awkward. But Chuuya knows where Mori is coming from. He’s seen other singers (not anyone from PMR obviously) fuck up their careers that way. He likes Charlie, but he’s not going to put his job or PMR in jeopardy because of him. His goal is to never have Mori bring it up ever again.

The only other person who’s opinion who he really cares about is Hirotsu, who had just said that he hopes he makes Chuuya happy and if not to let him know (he is both a soft and very hard old man.) A bunch of other people from PMR and practically everyone on his social media have chimed in with their thoughts, but Chuuya doesn’t listen or read any of it. Unless people want to talk to him about music, he has no interest in any of that bullshit.

He also has no interest in going to the Grammys just to placate Charlie. And honestly even though Charlie is his boyfriend and *Great Expectations* is a really good album, he hopes he loses to the artists from PMR. He’s not going to lie to him and tell him he’s rooting for him.

“Fine,” says Charlie, and Chuuya can just picture him pouting. “But then you have to come with me to Charlotte’s thing next week.”

Charlotte Bronte’s housewarming party hadn’t been on his list of priorities, but if it’ll get Charlie to drop it Chuuya can go.

“Sure,” he says easily. “Try to stay awake when the cameras are on you.”

“Thanks for the tip,” says Charlie, sarcastic but laughing a bit. “Talk later?”

“Later,” says Chuuya, finally hanging up.

He lets out the sigh he had been holding in. The Grammys can go fuck themselves.

“I can’t believe it’s already been three years since the release of *Double Black and Corruption*,” says Mary Stewart, the woman doing this horrible interview.

Not that it’s her fault, she’s actually one of the least obnoxious music reporters Chuuya knows. That’s why he’d chosen her when Mori had told him he had to do this. It’s about as fun as peeling off his own fingernails, but Chuuya isn’t going to tell Mori no. It’s just a little fluff piece, he can handle it.

They’re doing the interview in Chuuya’s office, so at least he hadn’t had to go meet them somewhere and waste his time there all day. They’re sitting on the couch by the window, the view of the Pacific Ocean is pretty spectacular behind them (it’s Chuuya’s favorite thing about his new office).

Mary had been efficient when she’d gotten there, quickly having her people set up to tape everything. She hadn’t even taken the tea he’d offered her out of politeness, preferring to get things started right away. Chuuya is glad her chose her.

“It’s pretty crazy,” says Chuuya lightly, making himself smile. “In some ways it feels like it’s been a million years but also no time at all.”

“I still go back and listen to it, you boys really nailed that one,” says Mary, and it doesn’t scream bullshit.

“Thank you,” says Chuuya, more sincerely. It’s still always nice to get genuine praise for the music, even if Chuuya absolutely never listens to it.

“Since the release of *Double Black* you’ve become sort of a renaissance man in the music industry,” says Mary, her voice slipping into a more formal tone. “You played guitar for rock

music group The Black Lizards for a year. You became an executive of Port Mafia Records at age eighteen, traveling all over the world to work on music. And then this past year you produced your first album, Motojiro Kajii's hit record The Literary City."

"So I guess my first question is when do you find the time to sleep?" asks Mary with a smile. "Is there anything you can't do?"

"I probably don't get as much sleep as I should," admits Chuuya with a laugh. "But seriously, I've thoroughly enjoyed every opportunity that's come to me since the release of Double Black. It's been great to explore so many different facets of music."

"Well, I think I speak for many people when I say that we'll take more of whatever you choose to pursue next," says Mary. "What's next for Chuuya Nakahara?"

"I'll let you know when I figure it out," says Chuuya. It's not really a lie.

"Do you have any plans to ever record an album yourself again?" asks Mary.

Chuuya had known the question was coming. He still has to fight off a grimace. "It's not on my radar," he says with a casual shrug. "But never say never."

"Should we also never say never to a potential Double Black reunion?" asks Mary.

"You guys never get tired of asking that one," says Chuuya, smile just a bit too wide. "But you all know I'm not allowed to comment on any ongoing Port Mafia Records legal disputes."

"I know," says Mary, leaning in conspiratorially and lowering her voice. "But they make me ask anyway."

Chuuya smirks at that, shaking his head. He doesn't reply though.

She straightens up, smiling widely. "Well, thank you for your time today, Chuuya. Good luck on whatever you decide to conquer next."

"Thanks," says Chuuya flippantly, grinning back.

Mary signals to her camera man to cut, letting out a sigh once he does.

"Thanks for having us," she says to him in a less polished voice than she'd been using. She sticks out a hand for him to shake. "I know artists hate these little bullshit anniversary things."

"Every job has its downsides," says Chuuya, shaking her hand.

He maintains a cheery facade until her and her team are out the door. Then he groans loudly, covering his face with his hands. He fucking hates today, he really does. Having to lie about Dazai feels like swallowing nails every single time still.

He's interrupted in his sulking when someone knocks on the door. He calls for them to come in shortly, not moving from his spot on the couch.

"Are you busy?" asks Mori, sounding amused.

Chuuya sits up immediately. "Boss," he says just a touch frantically. "Sorry, I didn't know it was you. What can I do for you?" he asks, standing up and adopting a more normal tone.

Mori waves a hand, gesturing for him to sit back down. He takes a seat on the couch beside him. "I appreciate you doing that interview. I know you find it irritating."

"It's not a big deal," says Chuuya. He might be lying, he's not sure. "But you wouldn't be here just to thank me." Chuuya knows Mori well enough to know that.

Mori smiles, not disagreeing with him. "How do you feel about Canada?"

"Never been," says Chuuya, eyebrows raised. He's a little intrigued. "I hear it's pretty cold."

"Robertson Davies runs the PMR office up there," says Mori, shifting to his more serious business persona. "He's an excellent business man, he was a singer when he was younger as well. He was more popular in Canada, but he did have quite a few fans in the U.S."

"Yeah, I've listened to Fifth Business," says Chuuya, nodding. "It's not really my style, but I was impressed by it."

Mori looks almost surprised at that, but he quickly moves on. "I agree. Anyway, Davies is looking to take a couple months off." Mori shrugs. "Health problems. I'm looking for someone to fill in for him until he's back at the end of April."

"Sounds interesting," says Chuuya, thinking it over. He had been looking for the next thing to do after Kajii's album. Going somewhere new could fix that problem. "When do they need me there by?"

"The 1st would be ideal," says Mori, eyes lighting up at Chuuya's acceptance.

"Then I better start getting ready," says Chuuya, smirking just slightly.

"Pack something warm," advises Mori, standing up. He flashes Chuuya another wide smile. "I'm sure you'll do an excellent job."

Mori's words are both a complement and an expectation. Chuuya feels himself both annoyed and excited by the challenge.

"Thanks, Boss," says Chuuya, laughing a little.



“You’re leaving for three months?” asks Charlie from his spot sitting at Chuuya’s kitchen counter. He sounds shocked. “To go to *Canada*? Why?”

“The man who runs the office requested some time off,” answers Chuuya, pouring him and Charlie a glass of wine, standing on the other side of the counter. He passes one of the glasses towards Charlie. He isn’t going to tell Charlie about the health issues, it feels private. “And Mori asked me to.”

“And you just automatically said yes?” asks Charlie. He still sounds caught off guard, but now he sounds a little upset too.

Chuuya frowns, looking at him and trying to figure out his problem. “He’s my boss.”

“You’re an executive,” says Charlie, frowning back. “Don’t you have any say in where you go?”

“Yeah, I do,” says Chuuya, crossing his arms. If he had really protested Mori probably could have found someone else. But Chuuya is looking forward to the trip the more that he thinks about it. He’s been getting a little stir crazy without anything to occupy himself lately. “I wanted to do it.”

Charlie’s irritation doesn’t really make sense to him. They’re musicians, they tend to move around a lot. Charlie is set to leave for a European tour in March anyway.

“So what about us?” asks Charlie, still angry but also a little distressed.

Chuuya winces, his reaction making a lot more sense now. Charlie hadn’t even been a factor in his decision. He likes him a lot, but he’s not going to turn down an opportunity like this just to spend another month with him.

“I mean, we can do the distance thing,” offers Chuuya. It makes him think back to the Falling Camellia tour in a terrible way. The idea isn’t very appealing.

“I could go with you until I leave for tour,” says Charlie, surprising the hell out of him. He sounds serious though. “I’ve never been to Canada.”

“Don’t you have shit you to have to do here?” asks Chuuya, trying not to sound rude but also too stunned to hide his less than enthusiastic response. “You’re prepping for a big tour.”

“I don’t want to lose you,” says Charlie, voice going soft. “I think I’m falling in love with you.”

Chuuya doesn’t claim to be an expert at romance, but he’s pretty sure the response to your boyfriend telling you they’re falling in love with you isn’t supposed to be *oh shit*.

“Charlie,” says Chuuya as gently as he can. He sets down his wine glass. “We need to talk.”

It's several hours later when he meets Tachihara and Gin at one of their favorite bars. The place is close to the PMR office and is usually full of other PMR employees. Tachihara and Gin are in one of the more private booths in the back though, away from the crowd.

"It's the heartbreaker!" calls out Tachihara when he sees Chuuya approaching. He's grinning widely.

"Fuck off," says Chuuya irritably. He sits down in the booth and immediately drinks almost half the glass of wine that had been waiting for him.

"How did it go?" asks Tachihara, a little more considerate this time but still amused.

"He...cried," says Chuuya with a wince. He scowls as Tachihara and Gin both burst out in laughter. He does not appreciate them mocking him right now.

There had been no way he could keep dating Charlie though, not when they were that off from the same page. Chuuya feels a bit bad for stomping on his heart, but it had to be done. Charlie had not taken it super well.

At the same time though, they had *not* known each other well enough to be throwing words around like that yet. Chuuya's heard about singers who jump into relationships and marriage, and that is not him.

Even if Chuuya hasn't dated much, he knows what love feels like. That had not been it. That had been light and easy, Chuuya had never even revealed anything super personal about himself. The closest he'd gotten had been when Charlie had stayed over at his place and told Chuuya he muttered in his sleep in the morning, and Chuuya had brushed him off. He'd felt way more towards Dazai when he'd still (naively) thought of him as just a friend than he had towards Charlie.

It is a little funny in an ironic kind of way that this is exactly what he'd thought he'd wanted, someone who would fight for him, someone who cared enough to stay. Instead it had been overwhelming and slightly confining.

Maybe he isn't as ready to date as he'd thought he was, not if it's going to be like that. Maybe he should stay away from musicians in general if they're all this way. The whole experience has left him a little drained. He's more ready than ever to go the fuck to Canada.

"Poor Chuck," says Tachihara, shaking his head. "You could say his expectations were too... great."

Chuuya stomps on his foot under the table and he lets out a yelp. "Shut up," he says harshly.

“You should be nicer to me,” says Tachihara, pointing a finger at him. “You’re leaving us again.”

“It’s just a few months,” says Chuuya, rolling his eyes. “Maybe by the time I get back you’ll have gotten closer to finishing your album.”

Tachihara’s amusement sours. The lack of progress of The Black Lizards is well known throughout PMR, and people are starting to lose their patience with the band. It’s been well over a year since Ryuunosuke joined them, but they still haven’t released anything. Hirotsu is the most unhappy Chuuya has ever seen him (and Chuuya has seen him look very, very unhappy.)

Gin speaks up next, eyeing him coolly. “So I guess your love story won’t be a tale of two cities.”

That makes Tachihara laugh again, and he fist bumps her. She smirks in response.

“I hate both of you,” says Chuuya darkly. He takes another long sip of his wine.

“We’re very sorry that you had to dump your clingy boyfriend,” says Gin flatly. Tachihara snorts beside her. Then she shifts to a less aggressive tone. “Let’s move on to more important things. Where are we going to celebrate your birthday this year? There’s no way in hell I’m going to Canada.”

Dazai truly has no opinion on Chuuya’s decision to date the airheaded pretty boy Charles Dickens. He couldn’t care less. Chuuya has always had tacky taste, apparently that extended to people as well. He is much too busy with his own life, writing songs, reading books, playing chess with Santoka, texting Odasaku once in a while. Dazai actually feels sorry for Charles Dickens, he’s being infected with slug germs.

He also does not feel anything when they break up. (Dazai does stop working on the extensive analysis and breakdown of everything that’s wrong with Great Expectations, but that’s a section of his computer that is never going to be witnessed by another person while he’s still alive.)

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### **May, Three Years, Three Months, & One Week Since the Release of Corruption**

“Let’s all welcome Chuuya back to L.A. after his time in Canada,” says Mori from his spot at the head of the table in the executive conference room. “The Canadian office was almost sorry to see Davies return.”

“Good to be back,” says Chuuya easily. He grins widely at Mori.

He had thoroughly enjoyed his time up north (even if had been *very* fucking cold). The people in the Canadian office had also been a little weirdly nice, but he’d grown to like it. He’d also liked calling the shots, making decisions about what bands and artists to focus on. His musical suggestions had been followed without question. It had taken him a while to get the same kind of response in Japan and Marseilles, but now he has enough of a reputation that people trust him (or know it’s a bad idea to cross him).

(The only truly bad experience he’d had while he was gone had been an unfortunate incident on a certain day in February where’d he’d gotten a little too drunk at a karaoke bar and had ended up performing a very strange rendition of *Corruption* by himself that had ended with him smashing his phone during the bridge. He’d never told anyone about that though and there was no evidence it happened, so Chuuya is pretending it didn’t.)

Chuuya had just gotten back from a trip to Fiji rather than Toronto actually though. He and The Black Lizards had gone there for his birthday, including their newest member Ichiyo Higuchi.

Chuuya had met Higuchi after he’d been in Canada for a few weeks. She’d been playing guitar for one of the Canadian pop groups. But it had been clear to Chuuya right away that she was being wasted there. He’d approached her and offered her a job with a different band. She’d said yes before he’d even explained who that band would be.

He’d told his idea to Mori, and he’d agreed easily. By the next week Higuchi had been in L.A. and meeting the rest of the band. Not that the meeting had gone very smoothly.

**What the actual fuck Chuuya**, had been the text Chuuya had received from Tachihara. He had not liked Higuchi much, he thought she had a giant stick up her ass. Gin hadn’t either, but for very different reasons.

“She’s in love with my brother,” Gin had said with equal anger and horror when Chuuya had talked to her about it.

“You’re exaggerating.” Chuuya had tried to calm her down. “She probably just admires him as a musician.” He’d mostly had a hard time wrapping his head around anyone meeting Ryuunosuke and falling for him. He’s as spiteful and bad tempered as he’s always been.

“No, she’s seriously in love with him,” Gin had insisted.

Despite not getting along with the others, Higuchi had been good for the band. They’d finally started to find their sound (and thank god for that, for his friends’ and Hirotsu’s sake.) They’re actually recording an album now, though they’d taken a break to kidnap Chuuya and fly him to Fiji for his twentieth birthday.

It had been a lot of fun, though Kajii had pouted that he hadn’t gotten to come because he was still on tour. Higuchi had come though (which Chuuya suspected was Hirotsu’s doing.) Akutagawa had been dragged along again too, and he’d remained sullen for the duration of the trip. He’d complained about the weather being too hot instead of enjoying the sun.

Chuuya had been forced to admit that Higuchi *did* have a thing for Akutagawa after witnessing how she acted around him. It had been thoroughly disturbing. But still, he had been the one to recruit her. So he had tried to help her out.

He'd sat down next to her (and Akutagawa, who was reading under an *umbrella* nearby) while Tachihara and Gin were busy swimming (more like both being in the water and taking turns trying to drown the other, but whatever).

"You want my advice?" Chuuya has asked, raising his eyebrows at her. "If you want them to respect you, get the tattoo."

He'd gestured to his own tattoo on his lower right hipbone. Gin's is on the back of her left shoulder, while Tachihara's is on top of his left foot (Kajii, that motherfucker, got his on his right asscheek.)

"I don't have the tattoo," Akutagawa had chimed in, voice bored. He didn't look up from his book. "It's idiotic."

Chuuya had rolled his eyes and gave him the finger before turning back to Higuchi. "Look, they don't like you because you haven't earned it," Chuuya had said, figuring brutal honesty was the best way to go. "They'll start to come around if you prove you're serious about the band. This would help with that."

"Who says I care whether they like me?" Higuchi had asked, voice a little haughty (though her Canadian accent made it harder to sound mean.)

"Fine," Chuuya had scoffed. "Be the miserable outcast then." He'd gotten up and gone to help Gin try to dunk Tachihara underwater.

Chuuya had thought he hadn't convinced her, but then that night she'd dragged all of them to a tattoo shop with a look of sheer determination. She now has her own black lizard on the inside of her right wrist.

It hadn't fixed everything, but Chuuya had seen the approval in Gin and Tachihara's faces. Hopefully they'd start getting along soon, especially if they were all going to go on tour together in the future.

It's nice to be back in L.A. again. He never likes to stay away from the city (or its ocean) for too long. He doesn't know for sure what he's going to work on next though.

Mori had offered to let him co-produce The Black Lizard album with Hirotsu, but Chuuya had turned him down. He'd told Mori that he has zero interest in collaborating with Ryunosuke Akutagawa. Mori had accepted his decision, smiling in his version of a laugh.

"Things are on track for The Black Lizards' album *Separate Ways*," says Mori, bringing him back to the present. "And Kajii's album continues to do well. He could probably add an Asian leg onto his tour if he wants to."

“The sales have been good this quarter,” says Ace (someone who Chuuya had *not* missed while he’d been gone.) “Kajii’s popularity has also made Falling Camellia’s numbers bump up again too.”

“How fortuitous,” says Mori, as if he hadn’t known that. He turns to Kouyou then. “I heard a rumor about some kind of merger going on. What have you been able to find out?”

“The head of Dragon Head, Tatsuhiko Shibusawa, is trying to buy out Gelhert Sound Services,” says Kouyou, nodding. “Though from what I’ve heard Shibusawa is more interested in GSS’s resources and contacts than any of their artists, not that that’s really surprising. They haven’t got many real assets on their hands.” Kouyou shakes her head a bit. “From what I’ve heard, he’s going to clear house after he takes over and start from scratch.”

Chuuya takes the information in, fighting off a frown. It’s really none of his god damn business. He shouldn’t care.

“That should be fine,” says Mori, waving a hand dismissively. “GSS have never been a real threat, nor has Dragon Head. They’ll go from two small players to one slightly less small player.”

Still, Chuuya can’t stop thinking about it for the rest of the meeting.

One of the things Chuuya’s mastered since working for PMR is to walk into any room with confidence, be that a stage or the Los Angeles Police Department. He gets a lot of strange looks as he walks through the building, but he keeps his head high and never falters. Someday, when he hates him less, he might thank Isamu Yoshii.

Chuuya walks right up to the Gang and Narcotics Division and pauses when he reaches the desk of a woman who’s nameplate reads Mizuki Tsujimura. The girl who he figures is Tsujimura looks up at him with wide eyes. She has blue-green hair that she’s tied up in a bun on top of her head. Chuuya would be more surprised about that if he weren’t so focused right now.

“Four Eyes in?” asks Chuuya, leaning forward with his hands on her desk.

“Um, Sergeant Sakaguchi is in,” answers Tsujimura cautiously. “But his door is closed, which means he doesn’t want to be disturbed.”

Chuuya starts walking towards the closed door right when she says the dickhead is here. He marches right up to the office and opens the door without any hesitation, flinging it so it slams into the opposite wall.

The surprised look on Ango Sakaguchi's face as he walks in is thoroughly satisfying.

"Let's get one thing straight," says Chuuya as he walks in. He stands in front of Sakaguchi's desk and glares at him, crossing his arms. "I think you're scum. And a liar. And I hate you. But I want to take down Tatsuhiko Shibusawa and so do you."

It only takes Sakaguchi a second to recover, probably because he's a professional liar and deceiver. "Why do you want to take down Shibusawa?" asks Ango coolly. "It isn't our job to clean out Port Mafia Records' competition, regardless of how you guys try to take advantage of us to do so."

Chuuya almost reaches across the desk to strangle him (because who was he to talk about *taking advantage?*), but Chuuya needs him right now. So he has to not blow up at him.

"Does it matter?" asks Chuuya. He pulls a flash drive out of his suit jacket pocket and holds it up (which he had put data on he'd gathered using PMR's resources.) "Everything you need to take him down is on here. You should be begging for my help."

"Isn't Dragon Head a little small for PMR to spend their time on?" asks Ango, though he does extend his hand for the flash drive.

"Just do your job," says Chuuya angrily, handing the object over. He goes to leave immediately after he does, not wanting to linger with the fucker.

"Do you ever talk to Dazai?" asks Ango before he reaches the door.

Chuuya pauses. He turns just with his head to look back.

"Haven't spared him a single thought since the day he left," says Chuuya easily, shrugging slightly. "I hate him more than I hate you."

Ango surprises him by frowning at his words. "I wouldn't have expected that from the way he used to talk about you," he says, voice strangely almost sad.

Any chance of Chuuya being able to hold his temper flies out the window. He turns around all the way and stomps back up to Ango's desk.

"Did you get off on it?" Chuuya asks furiously, practically shouting. "Pretending to be his fucking friend when you could see how few he actually had?" He looks at him with pure hatred, voice trembling with rage. "You make me *sick*."

He doesn't give Ango a chance to respond, turning and storming out of the office and slamming the door behind him.

Chuuya is still seething when he exits the building, his hands clenched into fists by his sides. He tries to take a deep breath to calm down.

It doesn't really work, so instead he decides to go explain to Mori why GSS owing them a favor will be good for PMR. He's still on edge even after walking all the way from downtown to the PMR office though.

It takes Chuuya a while to recognize where he'd seen the girl before despite her unique hair when he sees her while he's standing at the bar to get a drink a couple weeks later after he'd had his confrontation with Sakaguchi. But he eventually places her as the girl who'd he'd talked to, Tsujimura.

Chuuya decides to steer clear of her. He came here with Jane Austen and the Bronte sisters to relieve some stress, not think about how he's still fucking pissed at that backstabbing asshole. But his decision doesn't work when she's the one who approaches him.

"You're not old enough to drink," are her first words. She looks disapprovingly at his beer.

It startles a laugh out of him. "Going to arrest me?" Chuuya asks sarcastically, raising an eyebrow.

"Sergeant Sakaguchi told me what you did," says Tsujimura, lowering her voice. "He won't thank you for it, but I will. It's a good thing you did, getting a man like Shibusawa arrested for his crimes."

"I didn't do it to be a good person," says Chuuya dismissively.

He's not going to accept praise for something he doesn't deserve. It had worked out how he'd wanted it to. Shibusawa is in custody, and the deal with GSS had fallen through. He'd sold it to Mori as being to PMR's benefit, and Mori hadn't pushed him on his decision. Mori'd been entertained if anything.

"The sergeant told me that you used to play with one of the bands under Gelhert Sound Services when you were fifteen," says Tsujimura, voice gentler than it had been before, "That you had a falling out with them before you signed with Port Mafia Records."

"Freaking Four-Eyes," says Chuuya bitterly. "Always poking his nose into things that don't concern him." He takes a drink from his beer and shakes his head.

"I thought it was admirable that you would help your old friends," says Tsujimura, surprising him. She smiles a bit at him.

"More like stupid that I'd throw myself under the bus for people who tossed me aside years ago," says Chuuya, rolling his eyes. He shrugs. "I've always been a fool."

"I'd call it brave," argues Tsujimura, looking him right in the eyes. "You don't hold grudges and do right by people even when they've hurt you. Not a lot of people are strong enough to put others before their own pain like that."



Chuuya doesn't think before asking, "Do you want to get out of here?"

Tsujimura's eyes widen, and her face flushes. But she clears her throat and stands up straighter.

"I'm a detective," she says. "You're a Port Mafia Records executive." It's clear she has an idea of all that entails.

"I know," says Chuuya, leaning in closer, lowering his voice a bit. He locks eyes with hers, lips lifting in a tiny bit of a smirk. "Do you want to get out of here?"

"Yeah," she answers breathily.

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### **June, Three Years, Four Months, & Once Week Since the Release of Corruption**

Normally, Dazai would be thrilled to get to see Odasaku. He doesn't come into the city very often, and Dazai doesn't go anywhere very often. Oda is a little different now, a bit more distant. He's still kind, but he's a lot more quiet than he used to be. There would be long pauses in conversation when he and Dazai did see each other.

And normally when Dazai sees Oda, Ango Sakaguchi isn't there.

It's a special occasion though. Odasaku is moving to Washington next week, having landed a job there at a hydroelectric power-plant. His family friend had helped him get the position.

Dazai is sad he's moving so far away, but he knows it'll make Oda happier. Oda is never quite at ease in L.A, like he can see all the bad memories of the place around him.

Dazai also has his mixed feelings about the city, but he doesn't have anywhere else he wants to be. He's getting extremely close to being free to sign with the ADA. The closer it gets, the more impatient he is. It feels like he's in his own personal purgatory of sorts. Dazai is very eager to get out of it.

But for his going away celebration Oda had requested for Dazai and Ango to both be there, and Dazai hadn't been able to say no (even if just the *sight* of Ango makes him feel like guzzling acid.)

Dazai is on his best behavior for Oda though, which means he doesn't speak to Ango at all and ignores him whenever he speaks to him. It's the most he can offer the lying snake.

It's clear Oda had tried to recreate the old feelings of the Lupin, but the differences are glaringly obvious. For one, they're in a park instead of a bar. Two, none of them are drinking (because Ango has apparently inadvertently won that old argument and Oda doesn't drink anymore.) And three, there's so much tension between the three of them it's hard to ignore.

Oda is really trying though. "Hey," he says brightly. "There's an ice cream cart. I'll go get us something." He stands up and walks away before either he or Ango can protest.

It's blatantly obvious Oda had done it in an attempt to make them talk to each other. Dazai rolls his eyes, Odasaku is still trying to play peacekeeper.

"I saw Nakahara recently," says Ango, which throws a wrench in Dazai's plans to ignore anything he says. "He came into the office."

"Why the hell would Chuuya do that?" Dazai can't help but ask. It makes zero sense.

"He actually assisted us with a case," says Ango, frowning a bit (Dazai tries to ignore how familiar of an expression it is.) "He provided evidence against Tatsuhiko Shibusawa, the CEO of the Dragon Head label."

That doesn't make anything clearer. Chuuya going directly after Dragon Head is an odd business move. Dazai can't see the logic behind it. He's fairly out of the loop these days when it comes to the music industry.

Ango sighs deeply. "Dragon Head was trying to buy out Gelhert Sound Services," he says, like he's annoyed at having to explain it to Dazai. "They were going to take over and drop all their current artists."

Gelhert Sound Services is a relatively small label. Mori wouldn't go out of his way to assist them, there would be no real benefit. Which means...*oh Chuuya.*

GSS is still the record company that The Sheep are signed with. They've put out a couple albums the past few years. None of them had done that well, but they had been successful enough to keep them with the label. Chuuya is still protecting the group of backstabbers who had abandoned him immediately due to petty jealousy *years* ago.

It makes something in Dazai's chest clench. He tends to try and focus on Chuuya's flaws when he thinks about him, it makes things easier. But Chuuya is still as kind and unselfish as ever, regardless if those people deserve that kindness.

(Dazai had hoped that with time that he would stop missing Chuuya, that the distance would start to ease the ache whenever he truly thinks about him. Dazai's hopes have not panned out.)

But instead of warming himself up to Ango, the information makes him feel the opposite.

"Stay away from Chuuya," warns Dazai, glaring at the other man. It's almost a threat. Chuuya might be a PMR lackey, but Dazai would die before letting Ango touch him.

Ango isn't intimidated though. He smiles wryly. "You two really are two of a kind."

Dazai doesn't get a chance to ask him what the hell that's supposed to mean because Oda returns then, handing each of them an ice cream sandwich.

"Thanks, Odasaku," says Dazai cheerfully, acting like he and Ango hadn't just been at each other's throat the entire time.

Ango also thanks him in a much more subdued way.

“Thanks for doing this guys,” says Oda, holding his own sandwich but not making a move to eat it. “You two truly are some of the greatest friends I’ve ever had. I’m thankful to have met both of you.”

“We feel the same,” says Ango simply. For once, Dazai has to agree with him.

“We’ll always be friends,” says Dazai to Oda, echoing what he’d told him on the worst night of his life.

“Of course, Dazai,” agrees Oda, giving him a huge grin.

Chuuya knocks on Kouyou’s door and waits for her to say to come in. After she does he enters, a bit surprised to have been asked here this early in the morning. He and Kouyou spend time together, but rarely like this. Kouyou had sent him a calendar invite to come at this time, it’s very out of the ordinary.

For once, Kouyou isn’t working on something else when he goes to see her. She waves him forward to take a seat in front of her. Chuuya does, even more surprised that there’s no tea in sight. Apparently this actually *is* a work meeting.

Despite having the same position, he and Kouyou rarely intersect with business directly. Kouyou has mastered the art of business deals, and since Dazai’s left she’s gotten extremely adept at marketing as well. Chuuya on the other hand gets sent out of the country to try and get new things started or works on music, which Kouyou hasn’t done much of since she became an executive.

That’s why it’s even more surprising that the paper on Kouyou’s desk is sheet music. Chuuya does a bit of a double take when he notices.

“I have a proposition for you,” says Kouyou, using her business voice.

“What is it?” asks Chuuya. This is all very strange.

“Next month will be the five year anniversary of when I released *Golden Demon*,” says Kouyou. It’s hard to figure out what she’s thinking by her expression and her neutral tone. “Would you like to release a duet of us doing the song for it?”

“That’s what you want?” asks Chuuya, laughing a bit at all the formality. “Why didn’t you just ask?”

“I know you have reservations about recording music,” says Kouyou, choosing her words carefully.

Chuuya sighs, shaking his head. “Yeah, but that’s different. I’d love to do *Golden Demon* with you. I love that song, always have. I’m more surprised *you* want to do it. I didn’t think you were ever going to release music again.”

“Mori suggested doing something to acknowledge it,” say Kouyou, leaning back in her chair. “He meant more of a PR thing. But then I came up with the idea, and it wouldn’t go away.”

“That’s awesome, Kouyou,” says Chuuya, smiling at her warmly. He’s always hated how Kouyou’s feelings about music had been ruined by having no other choice than to do it when she was younger. “I’m honored you asked, really.”

“We’re going to have to rework it a bit,” says Kouyou, going back to a more matter of fact tone. But her eyes are brighter. “Both of our voices have shifted a bit, and we’ll have to figure out the harmonies. And it’s been ages since I did proper vocal exercises.”

“Then I better make us some tea,” says Chuuya. He stands up and walks over to the kettle. “My old voice coach told me it was good for the vocal cords.”

It’s different working with Kouyou again. So much has changed since they’d worked on songs together when he was fifteen. He no longer takes whatever she says as gospel or gets nervous to share his opinion when it differs from hers. And he’d forgotten what it was like for her to ruthlessly tear down his ideas. It’s humbling to say the least.

He’s having a lot of fun though, working with her again. It’s the most time they’ve spent together in years. It’s kind of nostalgic to go to her office first when he gets to the PMR in the morning. It’s half memory, half new experience.

They’ve pretty much figured out the song, they’re just trying to perfect it before they start recording. Chuuya had also almost forgotten how much fun and work it is to sing professionally. He’s sang to himself and with friends the past couple years, but he really hasn’t gone full out in a long time. The first couple days are a bit rough, and he’s embarrassingly pitchy.

Chuuya’s life at work is incredibly satisfying. It’s his life when he’s not at work that’s more complicated.

Chuuya had honestly intended for the thing with Tsujimura to be a one time thing. They’d woken up the next morning, he’d made her some coffee, and he’d thought he’d never see her again.

Then a couple days later he’d looked up her phone number and texted her, and it’s spiraled out of control from there.

They're not exactly dating, but they're not exactly *not* dating. They just spend a lot of time together at night. And in the morning.

Chuuya knows it's so fucking stupid it isn't even funny for him to date a *detective*. That's why he hasn't told a soul. He's keeping it tightly under wraps. Luckily most of his friends are too busy with their own things to notice something is going on.

He's tried to tell himself to cut it off, but he really doesn't *want* to. He likes Mizuki, a lot. Way more than he ever liked Charlie (even though it feels a little mean to admit).

But while with Charlie they'd pretty much talked about music the entire time, he and Mizuki talk about anything but. They both tend to avoid discussing work as a principle.

Instead they talk about everything else. One of her very first questions had been about his family and where he'd grown up. He'd avoided the full story, but he'd told her about being in foster care before meeting The Sheep. She's a good listener. He just really likes fucking talking to her.

It's why he's thoroughly annoyed it's overlapping with so many thoughts about Dazai. A lot of it has to do with working with Kouyou again, and working on *Golden Demon*. While it had been Kouyou's song first, Dazai is the one who he sang the song with during so many concerts. He's the one who'd he originally arranged the composition for a duet version of the song with.

He's thinking about him while he's lying on the floor in his office, they're working in here today because he has a piano. Kouyou is sitting at the bench and playing the notes while Chuuya listens from his spot on the floor next to her. He'd grabbed a pillow from his couch to stick under his head.

"Hey, Kouyou," says Chuuya while she runs a couple scales during a lull. "How long did it take you to get over the guy you left PMR with when you were sixteen?" The question had come to him while thinking over the song he knows is connected to some of those feelings for her.

Kouyou thunks on the keys inelegantly, letting out a loud and unpleasant sound. She turns to fix him with a very cold look, one he's seen before but hasn't been on the receiving end of frequently. "If anyone else had asked me that I would have left the room and started plotting how I could ruin their career," she says tightly.

"Sorry," says Chuuya quickly, wincing a bit at his thoughtlessness. He sits up on his elbows to give her an apologetic look. "I wasn't thinking."

"No, it's fine," says Kouyou, though her voice is still a little sharper than usual. "You clearly aren't asking just to pry into my painful personal business like everyone else."

"Can we pretend I am?" asks Chuuya, smiling without any joy.

"Sure," says Kouyou, tone much gentler. She sighs. "I was so naive back then. I really thought love could conquer anything." She shakes her head, more openly upset than she

usually allows herself to be. She returns Chuuya's joyless smile. "Someone once told me I would get over them as soon as I stopped being angry with them."

"When did you stop being angry?" asks Chuuya. His own anger seems to have no limits. If that's the truth, it's a discouraging one.

"I haven't stopped being angry," says Kouyou softly. She looks at the piano instead of him.

It's so easy to think of Kouyou as this strong, stone-cold presence. So few people get to see how deeply she cares about things. He also tends to forget how at twenty-four she's not that much older than he is. It's because she's always so calm and wise and understanding with him.

Chuuya had never had any siblings, but he thinks this is what have been like to have an older sister. Someone to look up to and have your back, someone to push you and be on your team. He's so grateful Mori had assigned her to be his mentor all those years ago.

But he also knows her well enough to recognize she won't want him to give her sympathy or coddle her. It isn't her way. It's a sign of trust that she's opening up this much to Chuuya, Chuuya won't ruin it by treating her like she's weak or damaged.

So he lies back down, changing the subject to something else. It's the other thing that's been on his mind a lot lately. Kouyou's the only one he feels comfortable asking.

"Do you think I'm a failure if I never record a solo album?" asks Chuuya, staring at the ceiling of his office.

"What in the world gave you that idea?" asks Kouyou, sounding almost annoyed.

Chuuya still doesn't look at her. "It's what everyone wants from me. It's what everyone expects from me. Mori wants it. You want it. Hirotsu, Tachihara, Kajii, I can see it on your guys' faces. I'm not an idiot."

"You are an idiot if you could ever think I'd call you a failure," says Kouyou, tone possibly the most disapproving Chuuya has heard from her. She stands up from the piano and walks over so she can scowl down at him. "Do you think I'm a failure because I stopped recording music?"

"Of course not," says Chuuya immediately. "You're amazing at your job. Everyone knows that."

"And you're just as good at yours," says Kouyou, crossing her arms. "I didn't think you were one of those people who needed praise, but I am thoroughly proud of you. What you've accomplished at your age is outstanding. Every project you've ever undertaken has flourished. You're the furthest thing you could be from a failure."

Chuuya feels his face heat up, and he turns away for a different reason. "Thanks," he says quietly.

“Stop being such a child and get up off the floor,” says Kouyou. She nudges him with her foot. “We have a song to finish.”

Chuuya is just finishing setting up dinner (well, takeout) when Mizuki knocks on the door. He rushes over to answer it.

“Hi,” he says warmly, gesturing for her to come in.

“Hi,” she returns with a smile. Mizuki walks inside and they both take up a spot on his couch. It’s pretty late for dinner, but they both tend to have long hours at work.

There are a couple people who know about their arrangement now. Chuuya had been talking to Mori about the *Golden Demon* anniversary single when he’d sprung that he knew on him.

“It’s come to my attention that you’re dating a detective,” Mori had said calmly, a wide smile on his face. “I assume you haven’t told her anything that could damage Port Mafia Records in any way?”

“Of course not,” Chuuya had said quickly but sincerely. “I would never.”

“Then we don’t need to discuss it any further,” Mori had replied.

“You’re not mad?” Chuuya had asked him, a little surprised.

“Chuuya, I have no interest in who you choose to date,” Mori had said plainly, giving him a flat look. “As long as it doesn’t affect your work, it doesn’t make a difference to me.” His expression had turned a little menacing then. “Although I’m sure I don’t have to spell out what would happen if she were to do anything to jeopardize this company.”

“No, I can imagine,” Chuuya had said, fighting off a shudder.

“Good,” Mori had said. The tone had been final, dismissing him.

“You think it’s funny,” Chuuya hadn’t been able to resist saying as he realized it.

“I could never have imagined an executive dating one of the LAPD,” Mori had said, smirking slightly. “You tend to defy expectations, Chuuya. It’s a unique quality in a person.”

Chuuya had thanked him, although he wasn’t sure it was fully a complement. Either way, Mori hadn’t brought it up since. Chuuya is perfectly fine with that.

But if Mori knew, it had been inevitable that Kouyou found out too. She had defiantly not found it funny.

“You’re dating a cop,” she’d said to him the next day when he went to her office. The words had been brimming with contempt. Chuuya had been very wrong when he’d thought he’d heard her most disapproving tone previously.

“I didn’t mean to,” Chuuya had said, aware that it was a weak excuse. “And technically, she’s a detective.”

“You’re dating a *cop*,” Kouyou had repeated, shaking her head angrily. “I can name five illegal things that crossed your path just this morning.”

“I honestly didn’t mean to. It just happened,” Chuuya had said. It had sounded bad even to himself. He wasn’t going to apologize for it though. He didn’t regret it.

“When this ends in disaster, you will remember I warned you,” were Kouyou’s final words on the matter. After that she had refused to hear more of his explanations. She’d pushed it aside to work on recording *Golden Demon* together. Her compartmentalization skills have always been powerful.

“It’s a little strange eating cheap Chinese food on famous singer Chuuya Nakahara’s couch,” says Mizuki, smiling as she eats a piece of orange chicken. “I don’t think anyone would believe me if I told them.”

“Who said it was cheap?” asks Chuuya in mock offense.

Mizuki rolls her eyes. “If you had told me this would happen when I was back in high school I would have been in total shock. I used to listen to Double Black in my car when I drove places. My boyfriend at the time got very annoyed with it.”

“It’s a good thing you’re not with him anymore,” says Chuuya with a smirk. “Sounds like he has bad taste in music.”

Mizuki laughs. She has a nice laugh, loud and full.

“He had bad taste in a lot of things,” says Mizuki. “But I ignored all that at the time. First love has a way of blinding us to the other’s faults.”

“That’s an understatement,” says Chuuya, tone a little wry. He takes a large bite out of an egg roll to distract himself from the heavy notion.

“Who was your first love?” asks Mizuki, smiling at him. “Charles Dickens?”

Usually it’s something he likes about Mizuki, that she asks him normal questions about himself. But he lets out a hard snort at this one.

“No,” says Chuuya definitively. Then his voice shifts to something more cautious. “I actually met them before I became famous. I was sixteen, they were my best friend.”



“That sounds nice,” says Mizuki, tone a little wistful, “Falling in love with your best friend.”

“It was a lot less charming in reality,” says Chuuya, frowning at his food as he picks at it. “They were a pain in the ass actually. We were constantly arguing about something.”

“Clearly it couldn’t have been all bad if you were in love with them,” points out Mizuki.

“There was this one time where I was just having like the shittiest fucking day, and I couldn’t stand to be around anyone,” says Chuuya thoughtfully, still being able to picture the view from the Yokohama docks even though it’s been years. “And they dragged me to this karaoke bar of all places.” He shakes his head. “I don’t even know why I let them. But then we just spent hours dicking around and screaming out songs at the top of our lungs,” says Chuuya, not able to hold back a smile, “And I couldn’t even remember why I had been so upset in the first place. It ended up being one of the best days of my life.”

He feels his throat tighten a little as he recalls it. It’s been a long time since he thought about that day. It had started out so horribly, and he remembers that part clearly too. But that’s completely drowned out by the image of Dazai laughing and dancing to that ridiculous song.

“It sounds like they meant a lot to you,” says Mizuki, kind voice bringing him back to the present.

“It does, doesn’t it?” asks Chuuya, tone a little rueful. He shakes his head and tries to get his head out of that risky space. “Sorry if that was all kind of vague bullshit. I just can’t give up that person’s privacy, even if we aren’t speaking anymore.”

“You don’t have to explain yourself,” says Mizuki, smiling at him. She passes him the fried rice. “I think it’s sweet. Chuuya Nakahara is fiercely protective over the people he cares about.”

Chuuya puts down the carton instead and pulls her in closer so that she’s leaning against him. “Enough about me. I want to hear more about how you were one of my teenage groupies.”

“I did not say that,” says Mizuki, laughing and shoving at him a little.

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### **Mid-July, Almost Three Years & Six Months Since the Release of Corruption**

Chuuya is on his laptop sitting on his couch in the living room when someone knocks on his door. It surprises him. It’s very late, he should probably be asleep by now. But he’d been in the middle of trying to fix a verse and hadn’t been able to put it down.

He walks over to the door and opens it to reveal Mizuki. She looks very agitated, and it looks like she came straight from work. She’s still in the more formal attire she wears for her job. She’s pacing but stops once she notices Chuuya.

“Something wrong?” asks Chuuya, eyebrows raised. They hadn’t planned to meet up tonight, and she’d never shown up unannounced before.

“I can’t do this anymore,” says Mizuki, voice both sad and angry as she walks into Chuuya’s place. She starts pacing again when she gets inside.

“Do what anymore?” asks Chuuya, though he has a sinking feeling he knows what she’s talking about.

“I can’t see you anymore,” says Mizuki, sighing deeply. “It’s wrong. It’s always been wrong. But I liked you, and you’re so stupidly charming that I tried to ignore it. But I can’t.”

Chuuya really doesn’t know what to say to that. He crosses his arms and watches her, trying to keep his expression somewhat neutral.

“I like you a lot,” continues Mizuki. “And I can see myself liking you more and more, which is why I’ve let this go on for so long.”

She stops pacing to fix him with a hard look, her voice changing to something more calm and confident. “I’m not one of those people who became a police officer just to have a job. I care about what we do. I think it’s important.”

“I want to help make this city a better place,” says Mizuki, passion clear from her tone and eyes. “It’s why I worked so hard to become a detective.”

“I never thought that you didn’t,” says Chuuya, keeping his tone mild.

“Please don’t interrupt me,” says Mizuki, holding up a hand. “I have to get through all of this.”

Chuuya frowns but keeps quiet, gesturing for her to go on.

“I want to further my career,” says Mizuki. “Sergeant Sakaguchi has been an amazing mentor to me, and I know you hate him, but he’s a good man. He works tirelessly to put criminals away.”

Chuuya doesn’t hold back a scowl as she praises the scummy traitor, he doesn’t even want to. But he’d agreed to let her finish so he doesn’t speak up.

“He doesn’t talk about his time in Port Mafia Records much,” says Mizuki, now looking a little more awkward. “But he’s said enough and I’ve heard enough to know what kind of company it is. I can’t support a place like that. It isn’t true to my values. The music you guys produce is one thing, but I can’t separate it from everything else.”

She pauses, trying to gauge Chuuya’s reaction to her declaration. “You can talk now.”

“I’m not arguing with you,” says Chuuya, shrugging. “I never claimed to be anything I’m not. And I respect your decision.” In the back of his mind, Chuuya had always known it wasn’t going to last.

“I don’t know if it’s better or worse that you’re being so understanding,” says Mizuki, frowning a little.

“It was fun while it lasted,” says Chuuya, smirking back. It’s better than getting weepy about it.

This really does suck, but it’s not like she’s wrong. Logically, they aren’t going to be able to keep tiptoeing around the fact that they have very different goals and priorities. The strain had already started to show, they’d started to run out of things to say that avoided their work completely.

Mostly he’s going to miss someone to talk about stuff with. She’d been almost a better friend than she’d been a girlfriend. Chuuya doesn’t regret the time they’d spent together, not a single second of it.

“It really was,” agrees Mizuki. She smiles sadly at him.

They stand there awkwardly for a moment, neither of them saying anything.

“Seeing as you just dumped me,” says Chuuya, smiling to let her know there are no hard feelings, “You should probably get the hell out of my apartment.”

Mizuki laughs, shaking her head at him. “You’re probably right.”

He opens the door for her, standing in the doorway as she hesitates before leaving. She looks a little defeated but not crushed.

“Scram,” says Chuuya, trying to help her get out of her melancholy.

She rolls her eyes but waves and starts walking towards the elevator. She doesn’t look back again, and Chuuya shuts the door behind her with a huge sigh.

Dating is awful, why does he keep doing it again? Chuuya turns on some music to try and cheer himself up while he pours himself a glass of wine.

He’s upset about Mizuki, but the thing that’s pissing him off the most right now is that somehow Kouyou always end up being right.

From now on, he’s going to follow her example. She doesn’t waste her time with frivolous attempts at romance, she focuses on her job. Chuuya should do the same.

And clearly, there where very little merit to the idea that you could get over someone by dating someone else. Chuuya resolves not to even consider trying anything again until he’s finally past all this crap with the worthless mackerel (though there’s a tiny voice inside his head that is suspicious that he never will be.)

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### **August, Three Years, Six Months, & One Week Since the Release of Corruption**

It is *finally* here. After a year and a half of good behavior (well, decent behavior) Dazai is set to start with the Audio Detective Agency next week. It’s a good thing too, he’d been starting to go slightly nuts with waiting. Santoka has been increasingly annoyed with his antics to keep busy.

So he'd started one minor fire, nothing had been damaged. (It had been better than listening to Kouyou and Chuuya's duet of *Golden Demon* for the thousandth time. His voice is still... that's not a sentence worth pursuing further.)

Right now he's at a department store with Santoka in the men's clothing section, trying on clothes for his new career with the ADA. It's nice to have a reason to not wear sweatpants for once. Santoka is sitting on a chair in the dressing room, though he isn't very interested as Dazai tries things on.

"How about this?" asks Dazai, coming out of the changing room and showing off his latest choice, a dark vest over a light blue dress shirt. He's added a bolo tie and a blue pendant to spice up the outfit. His bandages peak out at his wrists and neck.

Santoka had never said anything about the bandages other than asking him to take out the bathroom garbage if he was going to fill it up so frequently with them.

"I still don't see why you don't just wear a suit," says Santoka for the fifth time today. He doesn't seem ecstatic about sending his Saturday shopping with Dazai.

"Black is such an ugly color," says Dazai lightly, doing a spin in the mirror. "I'm sick of it."

Santoka's expression changes, a knowing look in his eyes.

"Tan," says Santoka, standing up and walking over to a rack with tan trench coats. "Tan is a nice color. It would go nicely with that."

He passes one of the coats to Dazai. It makes Dazai think of Odasaku, and the outfit he'd worn as a PMR shipping department employee. It feels right to have a piece of him with him while he's doing this. He's the one who inspired him to make the change.

"Tan is an excellent color," says Dazai, slipping the coat on. He flashes Santoka a huge grin and a thumbs up.

The Audio Detective Agency is still in L.A, but a very different part of L.A. than Dazai is used to. They don't have an office all to themselves, they share the building with other businesses. There's a small cafe on the first floor that Dazai would stop at if he weren't already running late.

Fukuzawa had offered Dazai a place to stay in an apartment near the office where most of the other employees lived. Dazai had moved in over the weekend, not that he had much stuff to bring. Still, he'd made Santoka help him with his few boxes (and he might have filled one of those boxes with books that he'd swiped from him.)

The apartment is possibly even smaller than Chuuya's old dorm had been. It's a good thing Dazai didn't have a lot of stuff. He's not sure a piano would even fit in the combination kitchen living room. The bedroom and bathroom are tiny as well, and he's back to sleeping on a twin bed. His legs hang off the edge.

He'd had trouble sleeping the night before, too full of energy and anticipation. The unfamiliar environment hadn't helped either. The walls were very thin, and he could hear muffled voices talking around him. The windows also let in a lot of city noise.

Dazai had taken a while to fall asleep and then accidentally overslept. He'd gotten ready in a rush after waking up and is walking up to the third floor of the building the ADA is housed in almost an hour later than he'd been told to arrive.

Dazai puts a smile on his face though and opens the door to the office with a flourish.

"Hello, everybody," he says brightly as he takes in the space and the people. They all look up at his arrival.

"It is your first day and you are ridiculously late," says a tall man with long dark blonde hair pulled back into a ponytail. His voice is deep and full of displeasure. He adjusts his glasses on his face. His outfit kind of mirrors Dazai's in a way, a black dress shirt with a tan vest and pants.

"I got lost," lies Dazai easily. He looks around at the office. He's trying not to be judgmental, but *this* place is a record label? Santoka had said it was small, but this place is practically microscopic compared to PMR.

"You got lost walking from your apartment a few blocks away?" asks the blonde with glasses, frowning and slightly glaring at Dazai.

Dazai places him as Doppo Kunikida, one of the ADA's few artists. Dazai had tried to listen to everything the ADA had put out in preparation, but he'd failed when he'd gotten to Ranpo Edogawa's discography. The guy is a little older than Dazai, yet he's written *hundreds* of songs.

"Some of us spend our time on more important things than directions," says another man. He's sitting on top of his desk and smirking at Dazai. He's short and his messy black hair is covered with a dark brown page boy style hat. The hat matches his pants and the coat that he's wearing around his shoulders like a cape. He wears a dark vest over an untucked and wrinkled white dress shirt with a loose blue striped tie.

"I'm Ranpo Edogawa," says the short man, his green eyes full of amusement. "The greatest songwriter in the world."

"You're only saying that because you can't figure out how to use the L.A. bus system," says Kunikida, turning to glare at Ranpo instead.

"I'm Junichiro Tanizaki," says a redheaded boy. He rolls his eyes at Kunikida and Ranpo, who are now arguing and have forgotten Dazai completely. He's the most casually dressed of

all of them, wearing a white long sleeve and jeans with a red sweatshirt tied around his waist.

“Aren’t you a little young to be working here?” asks Dazai, frowning a little. He hadn’t heard that the ADA recruited young artists like PMR did.

“It’s summer,” says Tanizaki, sounding a little offended at Dazai’s question. “I only work part-time during the school year.”

“Oh, the newbie’s here,” says a woman, coming into the room from a side hallway. “We were wondering when you were going to show up.”

She walks over to Dazai and Tanizaki, red high heels clicking as she does. She wears a mid-length black skirt over a white dress shirt with a black tie. The golden butterfly pin clipped into her short dark hair stands out. Her hands are covered with black gloves up to her elbows as she sticks out one of them.

“Akiko Yosano,” she says, smiling at him with a lot of teeth. “Head editor at the ADA.”

“Osamu Dazai,” says Dazai, smirking back and shaking her hand. Her grip is so tight he barely avoids a wince.

Yosano winks at him as she takes her hand back. “Welcome aboard.” Then she goes to join Ranpo and Kunikida, who are still arguing. Or rather Kunikida is semi-lecturing Ranpo angrily while Ranpo looks on with a blank face and occasionally says something rude back.

“Never go to Yosano for edits unless you truly have to,” says Tanizaki in a low voice, watching Yosano with more than a little fear.

“Then why is she the head editor?” asks Dazai, turning to look at the kid in confusion.

“She is very good at her job,” says Tanizaki, shuddering a little bit.

Dazai doesn’t get the chance to follow up on that because an older man walks out from the same doorway Yosano had come from, and everyone immediately turns to face him as he does.

“Mr. President,” says Kunikida with deep respect. He’s practically bowing.

The man who must be Yukichi Fukuzawa nods back. He’s very tall and has slightly long silver hair that he keeps short in the front. Unlike the others, he’s dressed in a dark green kimono and wearing sandals. The formal Japanese attire is a surprise.

Dazai looks over the man and wonders how in the hell he became friends with Santoka Taneda.

“Dazai,” says Fukuzawa, voice even deeper than Kunikida’s. He turns to him with a serious expression. “Would you join me in my office?”

“Of course,” says Dazai lightly. He ignores the looks of the others as he follows the president through the hallway he’d come through to a room in the corner of the ADA’s office space.

Inside is a large desk and shelves full of books on music theory. Perhaps he and Santoka have something in common after all.

Dazai keeps trying not to compare the place to PMR, but the office is bite sized compared to Mori's. In fact, he thinks he could possibly fit the entire office space of the ADA in Mori's office.

Fukuzawa gestures for Dazai to take a seat while he sits behind the desk. Dazai does, trying to get a read on the man. He seems to exude the same authority that Mori always had, but in a slightly different way. It's clear everyone here listens to what he has to say.

In other words, it's essential for Dazai to win him over if he wants to work here.

"I was reluctant to take someone on who'd worked so closely for that many years with Ogai Mori," says Fukuzawa, the sentence matter of fact but not cruel. "But Taneda highly recommend you. And I am also a firm believer in second chances, as I have benefited greatly from them myself."

"Thank you for giving me a chance," says Dazai, dropping his usual cheerful facade. He doesn't think the president is the type who would appreciate it.

"Don't make me regret it," says Fukuzawa. It's clearly a warning. "We run a clean business here. The underhanded tactics Port Mafia Records uses have no place in this office, and I will not hesitate to ask you to leave if I notice you slipping back into them."

"I won't," says Dazai. He tries to put his conviction into the words. But he also can't help but question his new employer. "You sound more familiar with PMR than I thought you would be, almost as if speaking from personal experience."

"I have known Ogai Mori for a long time," says Fukuzawa. His facial expression doesn't change from his serious one, though there is a slightly more visible frown. He doesn't add anything else though.

Dazai fights off his surprise. He doesn't meet many people who knew Mori from before he took over PMR, and even less who sound that familiar with him as a person.

"He'll likely come after the ADA once he finds out I've signed here," says Dazai, his hatred of the man slipping out a little. "He'll take it as a personal challenge."

"I am not afraid of him," declares Fukuzawa without any hesitation. He gives Dazai a hard look.

Dazai nods, believing him. Fukuzawa is not what he expected. The ADA in general is very different than what he'd been picturing. But none of the differences have been bad.

"I'm assigning you to work with Kunikida for now," says Fukuzawa, putting the matter behind them. "He'll be a good person to show you the ropes of how we do things here. We don't have a large staff, so we all help each other out."

“Sounds good,” says Dazai, smiling at the president. Kunikida seems very high strung, Dazai is going to have fun helping him loosen up.

“After a while we can shift to you creating your own album,” says Fukuzawa. “If that’s something you want.”

Dazai pauses for a split second, because the concept is still full of mixed feelings for him. But he quickly recovers. “Looking forward to it,” he says, not even sure if he’s lying.

“Welcome to the Audio Detective Agency,” says Fukuzawa. He leans forward and holds out a hand for Dazai to shake. For the first time a hint of a smile is on his face.

Dazai shakes his hand enthusiastically. “Thanks, Mr. President.”

Fukuzawa goes back to his neutral expression. “Haruno will help you with your paperwork.”

It’s a gentle dismissal. Dazai smiles as he stands up, walking out of the office with a smile. “You got it, Boss,” he says cheerfully over his shoulder as he leaves.

It’s not out of the ordinary for Mori to call him in for a private meeting, but Chuuya usually knows what it’s about. But he has no idea what Mori wants to talk to him about now.

He approaches the top floor of PMR with equal curiosity and anticipation. Ever since the release of the (extremely popular) *Golden Demon* single he’s been searching for what to do next. Chuuya hopes that whatever Mori wants to discuss will help him solve that problem.

Chuuya knocks on Mori’s door when he reaches it and is instantly called inside. He walks in and approaches Mori. Despite how many times he’s been in this office now, the view and grandeur of the place still impress him.

Mori gestures for him to come forward, and Chuuya takes a seat in a chair across from his desk. Mori’s desk isn’t blank, there’s stacks of folders and papers on it. But the space in front of him is currently blank.

“I’ve received some news,” says Mori. For once, any hint of cheeriness is gone. His expression and his eyes are flat as they look at Chuuya. It’s unsettling. “Dazai has signed a record deal with the Audio Detective Agency.”

“He *what?*” Chuuya practically demands. He has to fight to not spring out of his chair. He has trouble believing Mori, but he’d never lie, not about this.



“Yes,” says Mori, and his displeasure makes more sense now. Chuuya hasn’t ever seen him so blatantly angry. “It’s a small, independent label, run by a man named Yukichi Fukuzawa.”

“What are we going to do about it?” asks Chuuya, trying to get a hold of his emotions. Surely Mori won’t stand for this. He has to have a plan.

“Unfortunately,” says Mori, the word practically caustic in his delivery, “We are not able to do anything. I’ve had previous dealings with Fukuzawa, and I’m not able to take any actions against him.”

It hits Chuuya like a slap in the face. Dazai has signed with another label, and they’re not going to do a single thing about it. He hears himself demanding back when he’d first left, *So he just gets away with this?* He had been reassured that he wouldn’t, but apparently they’d been wrong.

Fucking Dazai, that slimy motherfucker had planned ahead, joining a label they couldn’t reach him at. He’s still as mischievous and plotting as ever apparently.

Chuuya had thought that after what had happened to his friends that Dazai was stepping back from music. Chuuya had been livid about the way he’d done it, but a small part of him had somewhat understood his choice. He’d thought the ghostwriting was just a means to an end. He didn’t know that Dazai had been just biding his time until he could do this.

Instead, Dazai is going to be releasing music for another fucking company. Chuuya is going to have to hear his fucking music. He’s going to have to play nice in front of the cameras when people ask him about him. He might even have to fucking *see* him at industry events.

Any progress he had made towards getting over Dazai’s departure evaporates in an instant.

“Is there a reason why you’re telling me this in particular?” Chuuya asks Mori, almost angry at him in a way for singling him out.

“I thought you’d like to know before I announced it at our next executive meeting,” says Mori coolly, eyes flashing a warning that Chuuya is playing with fire. He won’t tolerate disrespect from Chuuya, no matter how much he likes him.

“Right,” says Chuuya, practically having to force the word out of his mouth. He lets out a shaky breath and somehow puts on a more neutral expression. “Thank you for the update.”

“You’re free to go,” says Mori. His voice is a little less cold, but still hard.

“Got it, Boss,” says Chuuya, making sure to use a more deferential tone. Mori nods at him, accepting the semi-apology.

Chuuya gets up and walks out of the room, and if it had been anyone’s office other than Mori’s he would have slammed the door behind him. But he keeps his cool as he descends a floor to the executive suite, heading towards his own office. He pulls his phone out and sends a quick email as he does.

He hits send on his email requesting a new phone as he enters his office. The second the door is closed he hurls the phone at the wall as hard as he can. It breaks with a loud thud against the surface, pieces flying everywhere.

“SON OF A BITCH,” he shouts furiously.

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### **March, Four Years, One and a Half Months Since the Release of Corruption**

Time passes quickly once he joins the ADA. His days of quiet reading and poorly made home-cooked meals are over. There is never a dull moment at the ADA. They're always frantically working on something, mostly because due to their tiny workforce they have to do everything themselves.

Working with Kunikida has been thoroughly amusing. The man's fuse is about as long as a pencil. He flies off the handle at the drop of a hat. But he's also a talented musician, though his style is very different than Dazai's.

Dazai hadn't planned to get attached to the people at the ADA, he certainly hadn't cared much for his coworkers at PMR (with one glaring exception). But the people here have wormed their way into Dazai's good graces, and Dazai can't get them out.

Ranpo is obnoxious, and he needs to be escorted whenever he goes anywhere outside the office, but he's brilliant when he feels like it. He works the least out of all of them and gets the most done. He finishes songs with ease and is contracted by other labels to help them with theirs on a constant basis. He also almost always is eating something sweet, and his clothes are often dusted with powdered sugar.

Dazai wouldn't say he clicks with Ranpo in the same way he had with Chuuya, but they approach music in a similar way. There's an analytical aspect to both of their songs. They want to create music that has no flaws, where there are no off notes. Dazai knows he can count on Ranpo if he's ever stuck with an imperfection in a song (not that Dazai admits defeat very often, he has a reputation to uphold.)

He also quickly understood why Tanizaki had warned him about Yosano. She approaches editing with almost violent enthusiasm. Dazai had thought he was a perfectionist, but he has nothing on Yosano. If you went to her with a small question she ended up trapping you in her office for hours, listening to the same section over and over again until she was satisfied they'd gotten it right.

Dazai is also wary and intrigued by Yosano for a different reason. After spending some time thinking it over he'd finally put it together. He'd waited to ask her about it in private though.

“You used to be a singer,” Dazai had said, careful not to phrase it as an accusation. “When you were a child. Your manager was-.”

“Ogai Mori,” Yosano had snapped, cutting him off. “Yes, I did. Never mention that swine to me again if you want to keep your fingers.”

Dazai had clutched his hands into fists without thought as if to protect said fingers. “Of course,” he’d agreed easily. He’d tried to smile in apology.

Yosano had scoffed and kicked him out of her office.

But she hasn’t treated him any differently since. Of all of them, she seems to be the only one who truly doesn’t hold his past employment with PMR against him. Yosano clearly has an idea of what it’s like to be stuck with a guy like Mori as your superior.

Ranpo also doesn’t mind that he used to work for PMR, but that’s because he has no interest in things that don’t directly involve himself. In fact, he’d told Dazai that he’d never really created anything that had impressed Ranpo except for maybe Double Black. And he’d added that not all the songs were of the same quality on the album either, and that one song like *Corruption* couldn’t offset the other lackluster ones.

Dazai had brushed off his insults with a smile and then stolen from his stash of lollipops in revenge. It had seemed like a justifiable way to get back at him.

Tanizaki isn’t around the office as much now that he’s in school. Fukuzawa is adamant that he is not allowed to drop out. He says nothing good happens to artists who neglect their schoolwork for fame before they’re ready.

Dazai hadn’t commented, though it had brought up memories of Hirotsu making Chuuya do math worksheets in the Philippines. He kind of agrees with Fukuzawa, from a moral standpoint. From his old business views, it comes off as slightly naive.

He tries to fight that kind of thinking down though. Dazai’s tendencies to be a bit ruthless when he didn’t like a song had not been well-received when he’d first started. He’d almost made Tanizaki cry, and Kunikida had lectured him about it for over an hour.

Tanizaki might be the one who holds Dazai’s past with PMR against him the most. He hates PMR with a vehemence that is strange for someone who’s had no direct dealings with them. He constantly insults them whenever they get brought up (which is as infrequent as Dazai can make it.)

Dazai doesn’t really get why he hates them so much. Dazai hates them too, but that’s personal. A slightly corrupt record company isn’t out of the ordinary for L.A. He has a theory that Tanizaki’s disdain *might* stem from the fact that he’s a young artists that PMR had felt wasn’t worth recruiting, but Dazai keeps that theory firmly to himself.

Tanizaki is only rude to him about it when it comes up though. The rest of the time he’s pretty easy-going. He acts like an ordinary teenager, complaining about school and his classmates. He brings his sister Naomi in with him sometimes. She is *very* affectionate with her brother, in a way that Dazai has other theories about but once again keeps to himself.

Fukuzawa is mostly absent, choosing to handle business from the solitude of his office. He leads the ADA with a different kind of strength than Mori. He doesn’t hide his coldness with a mask, he is always very direct with his expectations. Everyone here tries to meet those expectations with enthusiasm.

Dazai spends most of his time with Kunikida though. Kunikida also holds a lot of disdain for PMR, but with less emotions than Tanizaki. He mostly seems to disapprove of them breaking the law (which is kind of hilarious.) But he doesn't bring it up much. Kunikida attempts to be polite (Dazai has a lot of fun getting him to say what he really thinks of things.)

Despite he and Kunikida being so different, they work surprisingly well together. Their first project together had been working on Kunikida's second album, Spring Birds. It's due for release soon after spending eight months on it.

That's the other thing that's the most different about the ADA, they're always working but things moves along very, very slowly. Mostly because they have to do everything themselves. They have to do the writing, the editing, the recording, the designs, the PR, the scheduling, the *everything*.

Dazai had been humbled to find out how hard everyone at the ADA has to work just to finish a single album. PMR usually had a bunch of different albums in the works at once and legions of people working on them. Beyond genuinely liking his new coworkers, he holds a lot of respect for them. There had been a couple people at PMR who he'd admired for their work ethic, people like Kouyou and Hirotsu, but they'd still had tons of outside help. The ADA puts them to shame.

Right now Dazai is in his favorite spot in the office, lying on the couch in the break area of their main office space. Kunikida, Ranpo, Haruno, Dazai, and Tanizaki all have desks out here. Yosano has her private office that is set up to be soundproof so she can work without distractions. The other rooms in the office are the recording studio, the president's office, and the music room.

The equipment and instruments they have are all surprisingly in very good condition. Though the ADA doesn't have a lot of money, they invest in the things they care about. The recording studio and music room are the nicest rooms in the office by far.

Dazai's desk, on the other hand, is cheap and constantly almost falling apart. Mostly because Dazai tends to store heaps of sheet music and PR strategies on top of it. His disorganization drives Kunikida wild (which is another reason Dazai does it.)

But unlike his stiff desk chair, the couch in the break area is perfectly comfortable. Dazai spends a lot of time lying here, claiming to Kunikida that the spot is good for his creativity. Kunikida calls him a lazy asshole and drags him back to work fairly often.

He's marching towards Dazai now, a scowl already in place. "Stop slacking off," says Kunikida, crossing his arms. "We have work to do."

Dazai frankly forgets that he and Kunikida are the same age sometimes, he acts like such a grumpy old man.

"Taking rests is restorative for the creative area of the brain," lies Dazai breezily.

Kunikida gives him a long look. "Is that true?"

“No,” says Dazai with a wide smile. “I made it up. How have you made it this far in life being so gullible, Kunikida?”

Kunikida bristles at the insult. “I don’t have time for your childish games, Dazai.” He glares down at him. “The release of Spring Birds is rapidly approaching, and you might not care about that, but I do.”

“I never said I didn’t care,” says Dazai, sitting up and giving Kunikida a more serious look. “There’s not much left we can do on our end. Really all that’s left is for Yosano to do her final run through and Haruno to finish up the administrative things.”

Haruno doesn’t look up at the mention of her name. She’s fairly quiet, and she wears headphones while she works. One of the only things Dazai knows about her is that she likes cats. She spends a lot of time helping out the president directly.

“That doesn’t mean we should rest while they contribute,” says Kunikida shortly. “There are other things we could work on. Tanizaki left a song he’s working on. Or you could assist Ranpo.”

“I don’t need any assistance,” calls out Ranpo easily from his desk at the other end of the room.

Dazai gestures as if to say that proves his point. “You are allowed to take a break once in a while, Kunikida.”

“I don’t need a break,” says Kunikida, shaking his head. “Being idle is for the lazy. If we’re not going to work on my album, it’s time we finally start discussing yours.”

Dazai freezes up at the suggestion. He’s been happy to work on Kunikida’s album exclusively since he started, claiming any solo album of his own could wait. He’d acted like he felt that way because he was a team player.

In reality, Dazai is still majorly apprehensive about doing a solo album. Kunikida had been the main driver behind his own album, Dazai had mostly nudged him in the right direction. It had been a different sort of partnership than he’d had as a duo.

If they start working on Dazai’s solo album, he’s going to have to be in charge. He’d written countless songs since leaving PMR, but none of them had been for himself. He hasn’t tried to make anything he intends to sing since he was sixteen. It’s...unnerving.

Dazai has been incredibly busy since he started working at the ADA. Much too busy to think about his former partner much. Although now that Dazai is back in the music industry he can’t avoid hearing about him from time to time. Chuuya’s name seems to be everywhere these days. He’s produced an alarming amount of albums lately, all of them doing extremely well. Chuuya is gaining a reputation as a renowned music producer in addition to being a beloved singer.

Dazai has been very thankful that while his coworkers bring up PMR and Double Black in passing, none of them have been very interested in talking about Chuuya. It’s been a relief

not to come up with clever quips to change the subject. The redhead has been almost entirely out of focus for him.

But writing music without him, that's been a task Dazai still feels a little unprepared for. Despite everything else, Dazai still doesn't feel right having to start an album alone. He's tried not to think about how Chuuya hasn't put one out either. But that's also because he doesn't like to dwell on the things Chuuya had struggled to write (or not write) about.

It's been over two years since he left now. Dazai hasn't had a single interaction with him in all that time. Not too long from now, he'll have been not working with Chuuya for longer than he had. The fact kind of makes Dazai want to break something.

He imagines contacting him now and saying any of this, *Hey there, slug. Long time no see. I know you hate my guts, but I don't want to write music without you.*

So much about Dazai's life has changed since he left PMR behind. He's truly happy with his choices, he wouldn't switch back to PMR from the ADA for anything. And yet...

It feels horrendously pathetic to not have moved on from someone despite not speaking to them for over two years. But the hold Chuuya had created on him had been so deep Dazai hasn't been able to free himself from it. He can't expunge the memory of Chuuya from his mind.

He's never deleted those last texts from Chuuya, despite clearing the rest of his phone of all things related to PMR. And when he'd moved to his apartment near the ADA he'd been unable to not to bring that old and ridiculous toothbrush (in fact, Dazai had learned how to change the batteries in the thing after they had died.)

Dazai is not some heartsick fool who spends all his time thinking about Chuuya. He's gone on a myriad of dates after being freed from hiding at Santoka's. Sure, he's never dated anyone very seriously. But he does not sit around pining for him.

And yet...

"He's afraid to write a solo album," says Ranpo before Dazai can say anything. He says it very matter of factly.

"I am *not*," says Dazai, offense clear in his voice. (He really, really is.)

"That's absurd," says Kunikida, eyebrows furrowed in confusion. "He's got one of the greatest minds in music, he has nothing to worry about."

"He's decent, but he's not that great," says Ranpo. Dazai looks up to see him smiling at them.

Kunikida shakes his head at Ranpo. Then he turns to Dazai. "Besides, it's not like you'll be doing it on your own. That's why Fukuzawa asked us to work together."

Dazai has never appreciated Kunikida more than this very moment. He smiles up at him brightly. "Well, then. Stop dillydallying, Kunikida. Let's brainstorm!"

Dazai stands up and starts skipping along to the music room. He can hear Kunikida stomping behind him, muttering under his breath about *bandage-wasting lunatics*.

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### **May, Four Years, Three and a Half Months Since the Release of Corruption**

“Do you ever read?” Kunikida asks him out of nowhere one day while they’re in the music room together.

It’s been a couple months since he and Kunikida started working on Dazai’s solo album. Spring Birds had been released and gotten really good reviews. Kunikida had accepted all of the praise humbly. It had sold quite a few copies too (or at least that’s what they’d told Dazai, Dazai has a bit of a skewed perception on album sale numbers.)

Kunikida had gone around on a mini press tour when the album came out to promote it. Dazai had tagged along. It had been weird to be back in the world of interviews and appearances. People had given him some surprised looks when he’d showed up. It had taken them a moment to place him as Osamu Dazai, former half of Double Black.

Not that Dazai had answered questions himself. He’d been there as morale support for Kunikida. Kunikida had said he’d just been there to bother him. Dazai had dragged Kunikida to some of his old favorite places he’d gone to when he’d been on the Double Black tour. Kunikida had thought he was messing with him when he’d said the unusual places held some great memories for him.

Kunikida isn’t touring for the album any time soon though. Apparently the ADA can’t pull the same strings with stadiums and arenas that PMR had been able to (Dazai had known the rushed Double Black tour was an anomaly, but hadn’t realized by how much.) Kunikida says they’ll get something in the works for a tour eventually, but that they should focus on Dazai’s album now.

The writing has been, well, slow. Dazai feels like any original ideas he has have just vanished. It’s slightly embarrassing. He’d won five Grammys over an album he’d written when he was sixteen. Now he’s twenty, and he’s struggling to come up with anything.

Kunikida has been both supportive and impatient. He keeps trying to bully Dazai into writing a song, which is amusing but not very helpful.

His question about reading throws Dazai off though. Kunikida probably has no idea how oddly well-read Dazai actually is. He and Santoka still exchange book recommendations whenever Dazai talks to him. The captain is fairly busy, but he still calls Dazai from time to time. Dazai tries not to be weirdly giddy about it when he does.

“Is Kunikida implying I don’t know how?” asks Dazai, raising his eyebrows at him. They’re sitting at a table in the music room, blank (and mocking) sheet music in front of them.

“No, you idiot,” says Kunikida, the insult without any real sting. “What’s your favorite book?”

Dazai thinks about it for a moment.

“Hmmm, probably Roppakukinsei,” answers Dazai. “In English it roughly translates to Six White Venus.” He expects Kunikida to ask him what it’s about but he takes it in a very different direction.

“Do you think that it is without a doubt the most well-written book in history?” asks Kunikida, crossing his arms. “That no one else has ever written with such depth, better symbolism, characterization, and plot?”

“Probably not,” admits Dazai with a shrug.

“Exactly,” says Kunikida, throwing a hand out for emphasis. “We love books for many reasons, but not because they’re perfect. We love books because they tell a story that for some reason grabs our attention and doesn’t let go. I would rather read a book that I enjoy than read something that’s considered perfect.”

“I wasn’t ever going to mention this because it felt rude,” continues Kunikida, adjusting his glasses. “But I’ve never cared much for Double Black. Or *Corruption*.” He frowns and shrugs. “I mean, sure, it’s undeniably well-written. The lyrics are filled with emotion, and the melody is unforgettable.” Kunikida shakes his head, frown becoming more pronounced. “But music doesn’t have to be painful to be great. It’s just as worthwhile to make someone smile with a song as it is to make them cry. Actually, I would argue a smile is more worthwhile. People get enough pain outside of music.”

Surprisingly, Dazai isn’t that insulted by the criticism. He understands where Kunikida is coming from. If Kunikida had just said he hadn’t liked it and left it at that, Dazai would have been secretly livid. He still feels protective over that music, like it’s a part of him.

But he smiles at Kunikida, thinking back to another conversation about what the correct approach to music is. “Kunikida prefers to make music that helps people.”

“I wouldn’t go so far as to say it helps them,” says Kunikida, face shifting to a less grave expression. “But if it can bring some light or joy into their lives, that’s enough for me.”

“So if I were you, I would stop worrying about creating the next *Anna Karina* and just write whatever you want,” says Kunikida, now speaking with his usual exasperation with Dazai.

“Whatever I want,” muses Dazai. It’s not bad advice. He doesn’t know if he necessarily agrees with Kunikida’s songwriting philosophy, but it’s certainly worth giving a try.

“Hey Kunikida, what’s your favorite song?” asks Dazai brightly, giving him a huge grin.

“I suppose it’s *The Prelude* by William Wordsworth,” answers Kunikida with a nod.

“Would you like to hear mine?” offers Dazai, pulling out his phone.

“Sure,” says Kunikida, though he looks a little skeptical.

Dazai turns the volume up to the maximum level so the music blares out loudly.



*It's a Friday, and it's been a hell of a week,* comes Shirase's voice from the speaker. Dazai bops along to the lyrics cheerfully. *Feels like I've been stuck in a losing streak.*

Kunikida scrambles for the phone and turns it off before it reaches the chorus, scowling at Dazai darkly.

"Why do I always fall for your tricks?" Kunikida asks himself, shaking his head.

"Let's start writing," says Dazai cheerfully, throwing down some chords and trying not to overthink them.

As opposed to his former partner, one of his favorite things about Kunikida is that his is very, very predictable. Dazai can almost anticipate his reaction to things down to the exact expression he'll wear.

He is however very unprepared when Kunikida looks at him one day while they're discussing the album and says, "It could use a love song."

It brings up an *old* memory automatically, a much younger Chuuya declaring to him *If we do this I have a condition, I'm not singing a fucking love song with you.*

Dazai quickly tries to shove the recollection away forcefully, giving Kunikida a wide smile.

"Who says I've been in love?" asks Dazai, laughing as though Kunikida has made a joke.

"I have zero interest in what you do outside of this office," says Kunikida flatly. He adjusts his glasses. "Besides, you don't need to have been in love to write a love song. They can be about wanting to find love, or not caring about finding love."

"Why do you think it needs one?" asks Dazai, dropping his cheerfulness to be more genuine. He truly doesn't understand. Spring Birds hadn't had a love song, Dazai had never suggested it needed one.

"I didn't say it *needs* one, I said it could use one," points out Kunikida. "Love is one of the emotions that makes people happy."

That is the unofficial idea behind the album, music that helps makes people feel lighter. It's very different than what Dazai is used to writing. But since Kunikida had talked him into it, they've made a lot of progress. The writing has been flowing much easier now.

That doesn't mean Dazai wants to write a stupid *love song*.

Dazai laughs even harder than before. “Oh Kunikida,” says Dazai in between laughing, voice just a touch condescending, “You’ve clearly never been in love.”

“I’m selective about who I spend my time with,” says Kunikida, flushing a little in probably a combination of anger and embarrassment. “Or at least I am outside of work.”

Dazai keeps smirking at him.

“Plus even if you’ve lost love, it means that at one point you had something worth losing, right?” asks Kunikida, more confidently. He raises an eyebrow at Dazai.

Dazai sighs heavily. “I’ll try to write one,” he says, giving in. He’s trusted Kunikida so far on his ideas. He hadn’t let him astray yet.

Dazai has horrifying thoughts of terrible lyrics about hair like fire and ocean blue eyes, and shudders at them. “I’m not promising it’ll be any good though.”

“It doesn’t have to be good,” says Kunikida, shaking his head. “Just get something down and we’ll work it into something better.”

“You are a slave driver, Kunikida,” whines Dazai. He does start jotting down some notes though, picturing an acoustic sound.

“Fukuzawa feels if we keep moving at this pace we could have a fall release for the album,” says Kunikida.

That surprises Dazai. Kunikida’s album had taken *much* longer. They’ve been progressing along pretty smoothly, but they still have a ways to go.

“We’re not even close to thirteen songs,” says Dazai, giving Kunikida a startled look.

Kunikida gives him a confused look back. “What does thirteen songs have to do with anything?”

Dazai realizes his slip up, it had been an old Mori saying, that the perfect number of songs for an album was thirteen. He’d explained it to Dazai once, going off about math and theoretical concepts. Dazai had thought it was boring so he hadn’t paid close attention. But he’s held onto the belief since then and hadn’t challenged it. He and Chuuya had kept working on Double Black until they hit the ironically lucky number thirteen.

“Never mind,” says Dazai easily. “Stop distracting me, Kunikida. I’m writing your stupid love song.”

Kunikida lets out a long breath.

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### **July, Four Years, Five and a Half Months Since the Release of Corruption**

“Come in,” calls Chuuya when someone knocks on his door. He doesn’t look up from the song he has open on his computer though, adjusting the bass a little to see if that fits better.

“Chuuya,” declares Elise loudly as she walks into his office. “I need your help.”

“Anything for my best girl,” says Chuuya breezily, waving her forward. He smiles up at her and hits pause on what he’d been working on.

“As you know, I am now fifteen years old,” says Elise solemnly as she takes a seat in one of the chairs in front of his desk. She crosses her arms and gives Chuuya a grave look. “I want to go to high school.”

Elise has been homeschooled her entire life. Mori had hired her a team of elite tutors to teach her anything she could want. It’s always made Elise smarter than her age. She’d been studying things like art history and Latin when other kids were learning basic science.

But Chuuya doubts her desire is motivated by the curriculum. Elise has become more sullen about the restrictions she has to deal with as she gets older. She’s tried to slip her assigned protectors more than once (and been successful a couple times too.)

Mori still maintains that it’s too big a risk to send her to school though. It’s put a large strain on their relationship, not that Chuuya would *ever* risk commenting on that. But Elise has been very forthcoming about her dissatisfaction with her guardian with Chuuya. She constantly calls Mori delusional and overprotective.

Chuuya feels for Elise, he really does. He doesn’t get what the hell he’s supposed to do about it though.

“How am I supposed to help with that?” asks Chuuya, putting his elbows on the desk and leaning forward.

If he can help, he’s willing. Maybe it’s weird for a twenty-one year old record company executive to be such good friends with a fifteen year old girl, but she’s always been one of his biggest supporters for anything he tries. He’d love to repay the favor.

“You have to talk to Mori for me,” says Elise, voice almost pleading.

Chuuya blinks at her. “You want me to what?”

“He listens to you,” insists Elise, eyes full of desperation as she looks at him. “He trusts you, he said so at home just the other day.”

Chuuya had known he was one of Mori’s favorites, but he had not known he trusted him. He’s not sure how he feels about Elise handing him the information after he’d been discussed while they were in their home. It feels like he’d just accidentally invaded the boss’s privacy.

“He was probably talking about music, Elise,” says Chuuya gently. He doesn’t want to let her down, but he has no desire to confront Mori about this. He genuinely thinks he might fire him.

“You don’t get it,” says Elise, and her voice breaks a little. “I don’t know a single person my age, Chuuya. Not a single person.” She snuffles. “I don’t have *any* friends. I’m always alone.”

Her face crumples, but she holds in her tears. “And I love you, but it’s not the same. I just want to be a normal kid.”

Chuuya feels like she just kicked him in the heart. That’s all he’s ever wanted for her, a chance to feel like everyone else. He’s always gone out of his way to treat her like that. But she’s right, one person isn’t enough. Especially someone who works for her father who’s constantly busy and often leaves the country for months at a time.

“Please don’t cry,” says Chuuya, smiling at her softly. “It probably won’t change anything, but I’ll talk to Mori about it.”

Elise gives him the most adoring look he’s ever seen on her. “You will?” she asks, pitch going high. She jumps out of her chair to grab his hands and squeeze them. “Thank you, thank you so much,” says Elise fervently.

Oh fuck, this is going to be terrible. Chuuya tries to keep his expression light though.

“I can’t promise anything,” Chuuya reminds her gently.

“You are the best thing that ever happened to this company,” declares Elise, not satisfied with just holding his hands and reaching forward to hug him tightly.

Chuuya pats her on the back a couple times, grimacing while she can’t see his face. Fuck, this is going to be *terrible*. He goes back to grinning though as she pulls away.

“You are the best,” says Elise. “Seriously.” She gives him a more conspiratorial look. “You should try to get him in the morning. He’s at his most pleasant then.”

Chuuya feels even weirder knowing that they knowing Mori trusted him. He gives her a thumbs up though. “Will do,” he says, somehow keeping his anxiety out of his voice.

“Seriously, Chuuya,” says Elise, going from giddy to more sincere. “Thank you. I really, really mean it.”

“Anything for my best girl,” says Chuuya again, smirking at her. Thank fucking shit he is a god damn professional liar at this point in his career. Not that he usually uses it on his friends.

“Good luck,” says Elise sternly as she turns to go. “Come see me and tell me what he says after!”

“I will,” promises Chuuya. He keeps his expression normal until she leaves the office.

Then he bangs his head on his desk. “Fuck,” he says to himself loudly.

This is possibly the worst thing he’s had to do in a year of many things that had been extremely awful. He can’t believe he agreed to do this. He must have a death wish.

Ever since Dazai had resurfaced last August, Chuuya has plunged into his work more steadfastly than he ever had before. He’d produced album after album, edited song after song. He’d spent a stint in South America and ended up working with Jorge Luis Borges on

Ficciones, which had been so popular it'd even gotten some airplay in America. He'd gone to Europe again for a while, Germany this time. He'd also gone to their other offices throughout the U.S, many of which he'd never been to before. Chuuya hadn't wasted a single moment, he had been more determined than ever to put PMR on top.

Kouyou, who was the expert at overworking herself, had told him she was concerned he was spreading himself too thin. Chuuya had brushed her off though. The music hadn't been hurting him, it'd been helping keep him sane.

He has made time to see her though, and the other people at PMR who he thinks of as his family. He and Mich try to video call at least once a week if they're in different countries, and Gin is with him ninety percent of the time. He gets sporadic calls from Kajii, which is easier than Chuuya trying to keep track of his schedule. He even talks to Higuchi regularly, still trying to keep tabs on his recruit. Hirotsu doesn't reach out much when he's gone, but when he is in L.A. he always makes a point to seek him out.

Everyone is fairly busy with their own work, so Chuuya doesn't feel bad for not being as present. The Black Lizards' Separate Ways had been a success, and they'd been promoting and touring this past year (though everyone had made it a point to meet up in Argentina for Chuuya's twenty first birthday, that had been a wild celebration.) Kajii is still riding the high from The Literary City, now adding *another* leg to his tour in Europe.

It's weird in a good way that he's no longer the odd one out among his friends when it comes to being really well known. Now when they're all out together people don't just call Chuuya's name (his name is usually loudest, but he can't control that.) He's proud of all his friends for making it big. They'd fucking earned it.

While he has no complaints on the music end of things from the past year, Chuuya has had to tell more lies than he can count for his job. He feels like he should just fucking stamp *I'm not allowed to comment on any ongoing Port Mafia Records legal disputes* on his fucking face. Then he could just point to it every time a reporter asks him about Dazai.

It's not just questions about Dazai that follow him constantly, it's about the entire fucking Audio Detective Agency. He gets asked about everything those losers do. He'd been asked relentlessly about his opinion on Doppo Kunikida's Spring Birds, which he had tried to avoid by saying he hadn't listened to it. Then Mori had made him say in his next interview that it wasn't his style but he liked it (because it was better for PMR's reputation).

In all honesty, Chuuya had listened to the album the day it had come out. He'd been baffled that it was something the Dazai he knew had worked on. It had been full of prose and *sentimental*. Chuuya had chalked it up to being more of Kunikida's influence, but it had really thrown him off.

The worst interview of all had been the one on the day of the four year anniversary of *Corruption*. Chuuya had seriously almost throttled the interviewer when they'd asked him now that Dazai was doing music again whether he and Dazai would collaborate again. He'd channeled his inner Count Douchebag though and laughed and repeated what he'd been drilled on because Chuuya is a *god damn professional*.

Despite all the success he's had this past year, it doesn't feel like enough to Chuuya. He feels like he never quite accomplishes anything real. No matter how many of the albums he produces hit number one or have sold out tours, he still feels like he's just reaching for something he can't grasp. So he keeps cranking out more music, hoping the feeling will go away.

Chuuya has also avoided dating like the plague. He is not in a good head space to subject someone else to right now. He tends not to spend too much time in one place for very long either. It's hard to build a connection with anyone like that.

His fears about running into Dazai had been unfounded though. The ADA steers clear of big industry stuff. They keep to themselves and only even have a couple recording artists. Chuuya still doesn't know how the fuck Dazai had ended up there of all places.

While Chuuya hasn't had to see him in person, online is a different story. Him joining the ADA has given them a huge boost in popularity. Kunikida's Spring Birds had charted high for an indie record from a label that unknown. Chuuya had seen pictures of the two of them out promoting it together, Dazai dressed in a ridiculous tan trench coat and smiling brightly.

At the core of his anger is a question, why is he always the only one who still cares? Why isn't he able to say fuck Dazai and forget all about him? It's really truly not fair. He's always the one tearing himself to pieces when people leave and the leavers never even give a shit. But as much as he tries (and he really, *really* tries), he's never able to be that hardhearted. There is a weakness in him that he's unable to carve out.

Talking to Mori about letting Elise go to high school is just the cherry on the shit sundae that is his life. But while he lies for his job, he does not lie in her personal life, not to the people he cares about. He'd told her he would do this, and he's going to do it. Even if he's practically sweating through his suit jacket as he walks up to Mori's office (while it's still morning).

He almost wishes Mori will tell him to go away as he knocks on his door, but he also knows that putting this off will not make it better. Mori calls out for him to enter though.

Chuuya opens the door, trying to steel his nerves. Regardless of what's going to happen, Mori did not respect fidgetiness or hesitancy. He knows Mori after working with him for this long. Chuuya wouldn't say their *friends*, but he's one of the people who is closest to Mori at PMR, probably even closer than Kouyou.

Still, he gulps a little as he walks in.

"Chuuya," says Mori lightly, smiling at him from behind his desk (Chuuya has a feeling he isn't going to be wearing that expression for long.) "What can I do for you?"

"I wanted to talk to you about something," says Chuuya, forcing himself to walk up to Mori's desk calmly.

"What is it?" asks Mori, raising an eyebrow. He gives him his full attention, putting aside what had been in front of him.

“It’s not about work,” says Chuuya. He stays standing because he knows he’ll get twitchy if he sits down. “It’s about Elise.”

Mori’s expression becomes much less lighthearted. “What about her?”

“It’s about her going to high school,” says Chuuya, channeling all of his media training for the words to come out normally.

“I don’t see how that is any of your business,” says Mori coldly, a tone Chuuya doesn’t hear often from him. His eyes are cold too as they look at Chuuya, his lips stretched into a thin line.

Chuuya could cut his losses here, but he reminds himself this is for Elise. Elise, who has always been practically his staunchest supporter since *he* was fifteen. Elise, who had pretended to like the piano for over a year just so he would hang out with her. Elise, who just wanted to go to freaking high school.

“It isn’t,” acknowledges Chuuya with a nod. “But I think you should reconsider. I think it would be really good for her.”

“Because you have so much experience in raising children?” asks Mori sardonically. He smiles, but it is a cruel smile.

“Because I know she’s going to be miserable if you don’t let her go,” says Chuuya firmly, not backing down despite how nervous he feels on the inside. “You want her to be happy, don’t you?”

“You think I’m sheltering her because of my position at Port Mafia Records,” says Mori, his voice calm but harsh. “I am not. Do you have any idea what that girl has been through? What happened to her parents?” His eyes bore into Chuuya mercilessly. “You’ve seen the cruelty the world is capable of.”

“No,” answers Chuuya after a moment of letting that sink in. He meets Mori’s eyes with his own. “I don’t know what happened. I’ve never seen any trace of it anywhere, and I would never disrespect you or Elise by digging into it.”

“But,” continues Chuuya, crossing his arms, “I do know how cruel the world can be. And I know how much worse it is when you run and hide in response to it. Is that the kind of future you want for Elise?”

Mori just stares at him, face completely blank. Then he says flatly, “Get out of my office.”

“Sir, I-,” Chuuya starts to protest before Mori cuts him off.

“I’ll look into private schools in L.A.,” says Mori, his voice no less angry than before. “Somewhere with adequate security. And it will be a trial basis.”

“Thank you, Boss,” says Chuuya, both grateful and surprised.

“I’m not doing it for *you*,” says Mori, sneering at him a little bit. He takes a deep breath then, slipping back into a more neutral expression. His eyes are still hard though.

“Regardless,” says Chuuya, his own expression serious. “I think you’re doing the right thing.”

He thinks Mori is about to tell him off again but his face becomes more thoughtful.

“It’s not a secret that I was hoping Dazai might be the one to replace me someday,” says Mori, shocking Chuuya in a different way. “I thought Port Mafia Records would be best under the helm of someone like me. But, perhaps there is someone better suited to the role.”

Chuuya had done a very good job of keeping his cool this entire time, but at that his jaw drops open in unbridled shock. He has no response. Everything that comes to mind is woefully inadequate. Fuck, Elise had been right. He *does* trust him.

“Not that you’re anywhere near ready for the position now,” adds Mori, smile still a touch cold but with a little more amusement. “Or that I’m looking to step down any time soon.”

“Now,” says Mori, shifting his attention back to what he had been working on before Chuuya had come in, “Get out of my office.”

Chuuya nods, still not trusting himself to speak. He kind of feels like he’s in a dream as he walks towards the door.

“And Chuuya,” Mori calls out before he reaches it. Chuuya turns to see him smiling cheerfully.

“If you ever interfere in my personal life again, I’ll decimate your career and leave you with nothing,” says Mori brightly. It’s not a threat, it’s a promise.

“Understood, Mori,” says Chuuya, smiling back.

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## **September, Four Years, Seven Months, & One Week Since the Release of Corruption**

### **Once More With Feeling, Osamu Dazai**

1. *False Spring*
2. *Winter’s Firework*
3. *I Heard It In This Way*
4. *Pandora’s Box*
5. *Fairy Tales*
6. *The Moon Has a Drink Waiting for You*
7. *Right and Smile*
8. *An Urgent Appeal*
9. *The Buraiha Trio*
10. *Play Me a Song*



Chuuya holds the album in his hand, staring at the tracklist with trepidation. He's never dreaded listening to a record more. It's the day of the release, and Chuuya has steered clear of others today. He'd waited until he was safe and in his apartment to examine it closely.

His first criticism is that it's not even thirteen songs.

He puts it down to answer a knock at his door though. He gestures for his guest to come in. "Thank you for coming."

"No problem, man," says Tachihara lightly. He hesitates after he comes inside, hovering near the door.

Chuuya leads him into the living room and gestures for him to take a seat in one of the armchairs. He hands him a glass of wine from the coffee table, taking the other for himself. His glass is filled to the brim.

"I need you sit here while not saying anything, drink your wine, and hold onto my phone so I don't smash it," instructs Chuuya, handing him his phone.

"Why?" asks Tachihara, taking the phone and holding it up awkwardly.

"I made a bet with Gin that I wouldn't break another one for a whole year," explains Chuuya, settling down into a more comfortable position on the couch.

"Alright," says Tachihara with a shrug, taking a sip of his wine.

Chuuya smiles a bit but then scowls as he presses play on the remote to his speaker system. The sound of Dazai's voice fills the room as his album starts to play.

They sit there not talking as the entire album plays. The only sounds they make are from them drinking their wine. Chuuya's grip on his glass gets tighter and tighter as the songs keep playing.

Once they reach the end, it starts over and starts playing *False Spring* again. Chuuya hits pause on the remote as it does, cutting the sound off. He sits up from his slumped position, downing the rest of his wine.

He sees Tachihara looking at him with a concerned expression. Chuuya stands up and grabs Tachihara's empty wine glass too. Then he spikes both glasses into the ground and shatters them. *Because what in the actual fuck had he just listened to?*

It's one thing if Dazai wants to fuck off and join another label. It's another thing entirely if *this* is the music he's going to make there.

It had been decent, nothing that Dazai created could ever be bad. But it hadn't been truly remarkable like Chuuya had thought it would be. Chuuya hadn't been left awestruck by the music like Chuuya *knows* Dazai is capable of doing.

It's infuriating. Sure, it had been pretty. But the songs had all been light and borderline cheery. There had been a fucking *love song* of all things.

Tachihara looks from him to the broken glasses and back again. Then he smirks at Chuuya.

“That was pathetic,” says Tachihara. “You call that a throw? You’ve gone soft,” he accuses him, voice taunting.

Chuuya scowls at him. “Fuck off,” he says harshly.

“Let’s see you do better,” says Tachihara, he gets up from his chair and leads the way into the kitchen.

That’s how he ends up spending the night Dazai’s album drops smashing his dishes with Tachihara. It is wildly therapeutic. They cackle as they break plates and glasses, creating a huge mess around them.

“You hungry?” asks Chuuya after they’ve destroyed practically every dish he owns that isn’t plastic.

Fifteen minutes later they’re splitting a frozen pizza, sitting cross-legged on top of Chuuya’s kitchen counter to avoid all the broken glass.

“The really fucking shitty part is that he could do so much *better*,” says Chuuya, blowing on a piece of pizza to try and cool it off. He scowls at his food. “He left, and he’s making this *bullshit*.”

“I’ve never liked Dazai,” says Tachihara with a shrug. “You know that. But it’s definitely not what I would have expected from him, even though I barely knew him.”

“I am going to get asked my opinion about this god damn album so many fucking times,” says Chuuya with a sigh.

“Tell them you think it sucks,” suggests Tachihara

“It doesn’t suck,” admits Chuuya, though the words burn a bit. “It’s good. It’s going to do well. But for a genius like him, it’s like, dishonest to how talented he is.” Chuuya takes a large bite of his pizza in frustration.

“You’re not going to be able to say that either are you?” asks Tachihara, giving him a sympathetic look.

“Nope,” says Chuuya. “I’m going to have to give some neutral response that doesn’t approve or disapprove. I’m sure Mori will email me with the exact wording.”

“That sucks,” says Tachihara simply.

They finish eating then leave the apartment. Chuuya doesn’t want to deal with the mess right now. Plus he’s too full of energy, his apartment feels stifling.

“Thanks Mich,” says Chuuya as they walk out. “If you ever tell anyone about this, I’ll smash your face like I did those dishes.”

“And he’s back everyone,” says Tachihara with a shit-eating grin. Chuuya shoves him for it.

“Oh, fuck off,” says Chuuya, but he’s laughing. “We should go out. Some shitty fucking techno club where the music is nothing but loud bass and not a single person will care who we are.”

Tachihara’s grin gets ever wider. “Let me text Gin.”

Mori requests Chuuya to come see him a couple weeks after *Once More With Feeling* is released. He doesn’t give Chuuya any details other than he has an idea for a project for him. Chuuya is absurdly thankful for the meeting. He could use a distraction right now.

Mori’s expression is hard to read as Chuuya sits across from them. There’s been a new side to their relationship since Chuuya had fought with him over Elise, who is now a sophomore at the most expensive private high school in Los Angeles and is elated about it. She won’t stop texting Chuuya about school.

Mori has treated him a little differently though ever since. He doesn’t ask more of Chuuya, but it’s like he’s watching him more closely, judging him more in depth. Chuuya tries to rise to the occasion and not waver under the scrutiny.

He also feels like Mori puts less of a performance on when it’s just the two of them now. He still smiles and keeps his voice light, but nothing to his usual degree. He’s more openly cold and calculating.

“I’ve been thinking a lot about what to do about Osamu’s album,” says Mori, leaning his chin in one of his palms. He still calls him Osamu even when he’s not there when he’s angry with him. “And I’ve come up with an idea.” He gives Chuuya a searching look. “You’re going to find it unpleasant though.”

Mori has never considered his personal feelings before giving him an assignment before. Chuuya raises his eyebrows. The only thing he can think of is his own solo album, but he’s made his feelings on that crystal clear. Mori wouldn’t bring it up to him again.

“This January will be the fifth anniversary since the release of *Double Black*,” says Mori, running his fingers of the hand he isn’t resting his head on against on his desk. “And *Corruption*. The *Golden Demon* duet was a huge success, but I think we could do something even bigger than that with this one.”

“What did you have in mind?” asks Chuuya. He keeps his voice indifferent, but something that has him revisiting *Double Black* or *Corruption* is definitely unpleasant to him.

“One of the reasons *Corruption* is so unique is that the solo is spontaneous,” says Mori, sitting up fully. He doesn’t smile though. “People still watch videos of you two performing the song live from the Double Black tour, and there are videos with over a million hits from multiple different cities.”

Chuuya doesn’t say anything to that, he’d been aware of it. He waits for Mori to get to his plan.

“I’ve selected what I believe to be the thirteen best versions of the solo,” says Mori plainly. “What I would need you to do is record yourself playing them, and then we can release an E.P. in January with all of them, titled *The Corrupted Files*.”

It’s an objectively brilliant idea. People are always saying which version of the solo is their favorite. He knows people download mp3s from videos online of them. Chuuya has no doubt it’ll be wildly successful if they do this. He can already picture the frenzy over it.

But in order to accomplish this, Chuuya will have to spend all his time listening to *Corruption* over and over again. He’ll have to listen to each solo extensively in order to find out the notes and then master them. The song will be on an endless repeat until he finishes it. Nobody else can do it for him, the piano style is unique to himself. He also doesn’t trust anyone else with the task.

He has to fight off a reflexive refusal to do it. Chuuya tries to remind himself not to be selfish. This isn’t about him, this is about PMR. It’ll also get everyone to shut up about Dazai, which is what he’d desperately wanted.

Sure, the last time he’d had to play the song regularly he’d been plagued with nightmares on almost a nightly basis. But he’s grown since then, he tells himself. Plus, it could be worse. It’s not like it’s *Arahabaki* (as if that’s fucking comforting).

Chuuya swallows thickly. “I’ll do it.”

“Excellent,” says Mori, smiling for the first time.

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## January 25, Five Years Since the Release of *Corruption*

“If you’re like me, you’ve spent hours watching videos online of *Corruption*,” says Mary Stewart on the TV in the ADA office. “You’ve watched the master playlist of all the different versions more than once. But Port Mafia Records has finally thrown us a bone with *The Corrupted Files*. Included in the new E.P. are thirteen versions of the legendary single. Here to talk about it I have Chuuya Nakahara with me.”

“Thanks for having me, Mary,” says Chuuya, his interview smile in full force.

“What inspired you to do this?” asks Mary. “Did you finally listen to all the online comments demanding it?”

Chuuya laughs. “It’s really just a gift to all the fans out there who still love the song after it’s been so long. This is for them.”

Dazai mutes the sound, scowling at the screen. What a load of horseshit. This had Mori written all over it.

Dazai has tried to not care about what Port Mafia Records does anymore, but it’s hard when they pull stunts like this. He can’t help his gaze from going back to Chuuya though, wondering how he put together the compositions for it. Dazai can’t make out any visible signs of distress from him, but that doesn’t mean much. Chuuya is a master at hiding his pain.

(He also notes Chuuya’s longer hair suits him stupidly well and he looks unfairly attractive.)

“Are they allowed to do that?” asks Tanizaki beside him. He’s frowning at the screen too.

“Not really,” says Dazai. They hadn’t gotten his permission to use his voice on the record. He would have to address all the legal business he’d been avoiding with PMR in order to fight them on it though. “But following the rules has never been one of PMR’s priorities.”

“I don’t get the hype,” says Tanizaki. “He’s not even that good of a singer.”

Dazai feels his body freeze. He turns to give Tanizaki a long look.

“You’re right,” says Dazai mockingly. “The man who won five Grammys for his music at sixteen is clearly untalented. That’s why PMR recruited him at just age fifteen and had him trained by renowned vocalist Kouyou Ozaki. He obviously just conned his way into his success with his bad temper and horrible fashion sense.” He rolls his eyes. “Jealousy isn’t a good look on you, Tanizaki,” adds Dazai dismissively.

“I thought you hated the guy,” says Tanizaki hotly, glaring at him.

“There are enough things to make fun of him for without resorting to making up lies about him,” says Dazai, smirking a little. “But the runt knows how to sing.”

“Whatever,” says Tanizaki. “It’s a cheap trick, releasing a bunch of versions of the same song to get another number one album. Classic PMR.”

“Very devious,” agrees Dazai, half to get back on Tanizaki’s good side. He doesn’t feel great about his outburst. But Chuuya has once again thrown him off his game. His behavior remains impossible to predict.

(Also if Dazai were still with PMR, he would have thought it was an exceptional idea.)

Dazai is trying hard not to get very angry at this new move, even though they are using *his* voice to sell albums. He tries not to let it get to him.

He has his own music now, and he’s pleased with it. Once More With Feeling had been the biggest selling record the ADA had ever had. A bunch of reviews had called it a great new leaf for Osamu Dazai. And Odasaku and Santoka had both told him it was something to take pride in. Their opinions meant more to him than the masses.

The Corrupted Files stings anyway. Chuuya is using the song that is partially about them against him. It's making Dazai furious.

But in addition to his fury, he's also deeply, deeply concerned about how his ex-partner is handling that much exposure to the song. Dazai can't see any dark circles under his eyes, but makeup is very good nowadays.

Dazai tries to remind himself that it's been almost three years now since he'd left and spoken to Chuuya. Dazai is the last person who Chuuya wants sympathy from. Maybe he's moved on from his difficulties with the song all together. It's certainly possible.

(Dazai doesn't really believe that though and spends the rest of the day with a horrible stomachache from how anxious he is over it.)

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### **Mid-May, Five Years & Three and a Half Months Since the Release of Corruption**

Chuuya is a bit groggy as he wakes up this morning. It takes him a second to recognize his surroundings as his rented apartment (or flat, as they call it here) in London. He sighs as he shifts around in the bed.

He had pretty much demanded Mori to give him a job somewhere that wasn't L.A. after the release of The Corrupted Files. Mori had agreed easily, saying Chuuya had earned it.

Chuuya has thought several times in his life now that he had reached the worst part of it. The first had been after his mom died. Then he'd thought it again when Arthur died. And again after Dazai left. Those months practically living and breathing *Corruption* had been the fourth time he'd thought it.

He had pretty much lived in his apartment by himself the entire time. He'd known he was too explosive to subject others to his foul moods. He'd spent pretty much all day every day at the piano trying to figure out the intricate solos he'd been the one to come up with on the spot at seventeen. The only positive had been that his piano skills are once again back up to the same level after that much playing.

It would have been grueling work even if it hadn't been the song that reminds Chuuya of his doubts about his humanity. His struggles with it had never gone away exactly, but he hadn't been so out of sorts about them in ages. Since a little after Arthur died and he'd dove into *Arahabaki* actually.

But The Corrupted Files had been a crash course in remembering all those feelings. He'd pretty much abandoned his bed and slept on his couch in the living room when he did sleep. Chuuya had forgotten what it was like to have nightmares that frequently. He hadn't gotten rid of them entirely normally, but functioning on that little sleep again had sucked. He'd been impressed with his younger self for dealing with it during the middle of a fucking tour.

When he hadn't been beating himself up with thoughts about how he wasn't really human and had forged a life by pretending to be one, he'd also had a bunch of lovely thoughts about

Dazai. He'd gotten to hear his voice start the bridge of *Corruption* when the solo ended before Chuuya got a chance to cut him off time after time.

Sometimes Chuuya hadn't even cut him off, he'd just let the rest of the song play out. One of the perks of Chuuya using video recordings had been he'd been unlucky enough to see himself and Dazai as they sang. He'd gotten to witness himself so blatantly in love it made him sick.

If he had still been eighteen, it probably would have broken him, those long months in solitude. Chuuya hadn't exactly come through it unscathed, but he knew himself well enough now to keep himself going. He had music and memories to offset the dark ones. He'd even ended up watching their old performance of *Life is Better With a Little Party In It* once when it had shown up in his suggested videos tab.

It had taken him back to that time, of being on stage and alive. Usually reliving the old days with Dazai left him bitter and outraged. It hadn't this time though. He'd watched their younger selves sing that ridiculous song and do their horrible choreography and laughed.

It had been a different memory that had helped him the most though, one he hadn't allowed himself to truly think about in a long time.

*I once read somewhere that music is the vernacular of the human soul*, he'd recalled Dazai saying on a cool day next to Lake Michigan. *I haven't said this because I thought I had made my thoughts on the matter perfectly clear. But if you haven't gotten in through your tiny skull, the music you write is the most achingly human thing I've ever heard.*

It had been like a lifeline of sorts. He'd ignored everything that had come before and after and just focused on the words, the feeling they'd been said with. Regardless of everything else Dazai has made him feel, human has been one of the strongest feelings.

Then when he'd finished *The Corrupted Files* he'd had to do a bunch of interviews about it, and he'd been intensely reminded of the other feelings. He'd spit out lie after lie with a smile on his face though.

Being in London has been nice. He hasn't been directly in charge of any albums here, just overseeing things mostly. Chuuya doesn't mind having a slightly lighter workload right now. He's put himself through the ringer recently, a break isn't the worst thing.

Chuuya gets out of bed and makes his way to the kitchen to make himself some tea. He's planning out his day when a voice comes from the living room, scaring the absolute shit out of him. Chuuya turns towards the voice so quickly it hurts his neck a bit.

"Good morning," says Mori, sitting on Chuuya's couch. He gives a little wave.

"Boss?" asks Chuuya in disbelief. He's rarely seen Mori outside of L.A. during his entire career with PMR, and his absences from the main office were usually planned far in advance.

"Hello, Chuuya," says Mori with a smile. He gestures for Chuuya to sit down next to him.

Chuuya does, even though it feels a little weird to be directed to sit in his own flat.

“There’s been a recent development that I thought would be better to discuss in person,” says Mori, dropping the smile. He looks slightly annoyed, which instantly raises Chuuya’s alarm bells.

“What’s going on?” asks Chuuya.

“It’s not a Port Mafia Records matter,” says Mori, giving Chuuya a neutral look. “Or not directly. It’s about you, actually.”

“It’s about me?” asks Chuuya, eyes narrowing.

“The Kashimuras, your mother’s parents, have discovered that you are related to them,” Mori tells him flatly. “They are asking to meet with you.”

Of all the things that Mori could have said, this is so entirely unexpected. He hadn’t even thought about his mom’s family in many years. He’d given up on ever even speaking to them.

“And if you don’t want to meet with them,” continues Mori, a slight frown now visible, “Then they’re threatening to reveal the details of how your mother died.”

It’s like someone has sucked out all the air in the room. Chuuya blinks to try and clear his vision. He doesn’t even care that he’s freaking out in front of Mori like this, this is too much to try and retain some bullshit facade.

Chuuya can handle a lot, he has handled a lot. But the world knowing what had happened to him, he can’t do that. He just can’t.

He also has absolutely no desire to meet with the Kashimuras. He hadn’t before this, and he wants to even less now. It sounds like they’re just trying to take advantage of someone famous who’d they’d found out they have a connection to.

“You can choose to proceed however you want,” says Mori. He doesn’t give Chuuya sympathy, but the words are much kinder than Mori’s usual delivery. Then his voice turns harder. “And if those money-grubbing vultures do come after you, you’ll have the full might of Port Mafia Records to fight back with.”

“I don’t want to meet them,” says Chuuya quietly. He looks off to the side as he admits it.

“Then you don’t have to,” says Mori simply. “I can handle the rest. If those people know what’s good for them, they’ll keep their mouths shut.”

Chuuya has always been grateful to Mori for giving him a career, but he’s never been as grateful as he is right now.

“You came all the way out here to tell me this?” asks Chuuya, surprised he hadn’t just talked to him about it over the phone.



“It’s been a while since I’ve gotten to get out of L.A.,” says Mori lightly. “Plus Elise keeps whining about how all of her friends from school have been to Europe, but she never has. I brought her along with me to get her to drop it.”

Chuuya laughs, full of affection for Elise and her guardian. People who see Mori only as a scheming and manipulative person usually missed out on this side of him. Chuuya is one of the few people who gets to witness it.

“I can show her around if you want,” offers Chuuya.

“That would allow me a chance to visit our contacts here in London,” says Mori with a nod. He gives Chuuya a more searching look then. “I also have a different assignment for you once you return to L.A.”

“What is it?” asks Chuuya.

“We initially recruited Ryuunosuke Akutagawa as a solo artist, but then after you correctly identified he wasn’t quite ready for that we stuck him in The Black Lizards to give him a chance to do some growing,” says Mori. He smirks a little. “He’s now fully grown, and it’s time for him to start his first solo album.”

Chuuya knows what his next words are going to be before he even says them. “I want you to produce the album.”

“Is this an offer or an order?” asks Chuuya, letting out a kind of half-snort. He has not warmed up to Akutagawa even though he’s very close with all his other bandmates.

“You can think of it as a choice if that makes it easier,” says Mori, smirk fuller now.

“Fine, I’ll work with the guy,” says Chuuya, shaking his head. He is very much not looking forward to it.

Chuuya stands and walks over to his kitchen. “You want some tea, Boss?”

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## **July, Five Years & Six Months Since the Release of Corruption**

Chuuya has worked on some difficult albums before. He’s dealt with writer’s block and having to cut huge batches of songs in the middle of a project. He’s tackled band members hating each other’s guts and threatening to quit.

None of that has prepared him for the horror that is working one on one with Ryuunosuke Akutagawa.

It has been a month, and it has been the longest month of Chuuya’s life (and Chuuya has had many, many long months.)

Chuuya prides himself on getting along with pretty much everyone at PMR. Akutagawa has always been an exception. They’d spent time together in groups, and Akutagawa has

faithfully attended his birthday trip with the other Black Lizards every year. But Chuuya has never gotten through his rough outer edges in any of those instances.

It would be different if Chuuya had done something to piss him off. Then he would get it. But he seriously has never done anything to the guy. He's *tried* to be fucking nice to him, even when the shithead hadn't deserved it.

This whole thing had been a mess from the start. When he'd first gotten home he'd been surprised with Tachihara blowing up at him unexpectedly. He'd screamed and sworn at Chuuya for leaving The Black Lizards without a singer.

"Are we just a fucking stop along the way for whatever solo artist you and Mori want to train next?" Tachihara had demanded furiously. "Now we're left fucking hanging." He'd glared at Chuuya. "Let me know when you find us our next singer. Then we can go through this again when you decide to snatch them too."

Chuuya had been too caught off guard and pissed to reply, and Tachihara had stormed out of his office and slammed the door.

A week had passed before Gin had come to see him. He'd prepared himself for another argument, but that hadn't been what she'd been after.

"You should apologize to Tachihara," she'd said coolly, giving him a flat look.

"I am not going to apologize for something that wasn't even my fucking decision," Chuuya had snapped back.

"You singers have no idea what it's like," Gin had said, shaking her head at him. "You can just release music whenever you want. You don't need other people to do it."

"It's not like that when you play an instrument," she'd continued, fixing him with a cold stare. "We're stuck if we don't have a singer. Nobody wants to listen to music without vocals. And you get even less respect as a rhythm musician, playing the drums or the bass. People see you as just background noise, you get thrown into whatever music you can get your hands on."

"I used to *play* guitar for the band," Chuuya had reminded her shortly.

"Look me in the eyes and tell me right now that if you wanted to record an album this very second you couldn't do it with ease," Gin had said simply. She'd crossed her arms and waited for a reply.

"Yes, I could," Chuuya had admitted, softening a little.

"I know it wasn't your decision," Gin had said, sounding less angry. "But you have to try to understand what Tachihara is dealing with. It's different for me because Ryuu is my brother, and I've always known he'd eventually go solo. But even for me, the change hasn't been easy."

“I’ll talk to him,” Chuuya had promised her. She’d nodded, smiling at him as she turned to leave.

Chuuya had sought Tachihara out that night at Tachihara’s apartment, knowing he’d have to be the one to track him down. He’d banged on the door until Tachihara had let him in.

“What?” he’d demanded shortly when he opened the door.

“I was an asshole,” Chuuya had said plainly. “You were right to be pissed at me. I’m really fucking sorry.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever heard you apologize to anyone before,” had been Tachihara’s response, raising his eyebrows at him.

“I am trying to be nice here,” Chuuya had said, fighting not to roll his eyes. “I’ll sing for you guys.”

It is not an offer he’d made lightly. Chuuya hadn’t committed to anything that big vocally since Double Black. But he would do it for Tachihara and Gin and Higuchi.

Tachihara had laughed at his offer though, smirking at Chuuya. “You do not have a voice for rock, Baby Red.”

Chuuya had scowled at him and flicked him off. Tachihara had invited him in and they’d gotten along like usual.

Chuuya has been on the lookout for a singer for The Black Lizards ever since though. He’s determined to find someone who will be a permanent fixture this time. He’d rejected some suggestions of people who he knew were just looking for a way to pass time.

Akutagawa doesn’t seem very torn up about leaving the band he’s played with for years though. That’s not the aspect of doing his album that he has a problem with.

His surly temperament has always annoyed Chuuya, but it’s gotten worse being subjected to it constantly. Akutagawa argues with him on almost every suggestion Chuuya makes. It’s like he’s determined to do whatever the opposite of what Chuuya thinks.

Chuuya kind of wants to strangle him by this point.

Right now they’re alone together in Chuuya’s office. Akutagawa had flatly refused the tea he’d offered him and is sitting in one of Chuuya’s chairs by the windows, a piece of sheet music in his hands. They haven’t even finished a single song in the time they’ve been working together.

“That’s not going to work,” says Akutagawa dismissively of the music Chuuya had handed him. He’s one of the only people who is so disrespectful to Chuuya’s face. “I’m not going to sing heavy ballads. You’re confusing our styles.”

“Well, excuse me for fucking contributing,” says Chuuya from the chair next to him. He puts down his tea angrily. “Maybe you’d like to offer something up for a change.”

“I’m not a songwriter,” says Akutagawa for what is probably the hundredth time.

“You’ve never written a song,” says Chuuya, making the distinction. “You could write a song. You’re just refusing to for some reason.”

“I never claimed to *want* to write music,” says Akutagawa, giving him a look full of contempt.

“Then you have to accept something that someone else writes,” snaps Chuuya. He glares at the stubborn bastard. “You can’t have it both ways.”

“And that writer has to be you?” asks Akutagawa, scorn clear in his voice.

Chuuya has attempted to give the guy a break. He has been more than patient with his petty comments and insults. He has held his tongue as much as he could. But Chuuya can’t put up with this shit any longer.

“What is your fucking problem?” demands Chuuya, raising his voice. “Seriously? Do you not want to record a solo album? Because if you don’t we can be done right now. I would love to be rid of you.”

“I didn’t say I didn’t want to do a solo album,” says Akutagawa back, keeping his voice level. It just pisses Chuuya off more.

“Then what?” he asks him, throwing his hands in the air. “What is the god damn issue? Why are you being such a little bitch?”

“Maybe I just don’t want to work with *you*,” replies Akutagawa coolly.

Chuuya has to take a moment in order to not throw a punch. But he is not as hot-headed as he was at seventeen. Plus he doesn’t think violence will get through to Ryuunosuke like it did with Kajii.

“Why?” asks Chuuya plainly. “You literally don’t even know me. We’ve never even worked together.”

Akutagawa scoffs. “Do you have any idea how long I spent having every single thing I did compared to you? How much I could never live up to *perfect vocalist* Chuuya Nakahara?”

“What?” asks Chuuya, blind-sided by the information.

“I worked with Dazai for almost a year,” says Akutagawa flatly. “Nothing I ever did lived up to his expectations. You were his favorite example of what I couldn’t achieve.”

A million interactions he’s had with Akutagawa suddenly make a lot more sense. The way the other boy had always been a touch colder to him than the others. The way he’d bristled whenever Chuuya had complemented him on The Black Lizards' successes.

Chuuya had really thought he was done finding new things to be mad at Dazai for. But seriously, what the fuck had he been thinking? He’d known Dazai had been hard on

Akutagawa, and he hadn't necessarily approved, but he hadn't known the extent of it.

It's blatantly obvious now that Akutagawa's real problems stem from a twisted combination of low self-esteem and arrogance that had been drilled into at fifteen.

*God damn it mackerel*, thinks Chuuya to himself. *Why the fuck am I still cleaning up your messes?*

And what the hell had he been playing at calling him a *perfect vocalist* behind his back? He had never been that complementary to Chuuya's face. Chuuya wishes it didn't make him feel so conflicted. Dazai's approval in music isn't easy to gain, and Chuuya had always secretly wanted to gain it. To know he'd had it the whole thing is severely fucking with his head.

But Chuuya shoves that aside for now. They're not here to talk about his unresolved issues with Dazai right now, they're here to start fixing Akutagawa's.

"Dazai called me pitchy practically every day I worked with him," says Chuuya, the words a little hard to get out. "His standards were absurd. And you've come a long way since then. I wouldn't have agreed to do this album if I didn't think it was going to be something worthwhile. I don't waste my time on mediocre music."

"I never even got a chance to prove myself to him," says Akutagawa bitterly. "He left before I ever got the chance."

"Fuck him," says Chuuya vehemently. "Osamu Dazai is not the end-all, be-all of the music world. Tell me honestly, what did you think of Once More With Feeling?"

Akutagawa swallows, looking uncomfortable. "Oddly sentimental and not up to his full potential," he answers awkwardly, as if expecting to be punished for the opinion.

"So why are you wasting your time trying to impress some asshole who's music isn't perfect himself?" asks Chuuya, giving him a long look.

"He was my mentor," says Akutagawa. He shrugs. "I learned practically everything I know about music from him."

Chuuya sighs. "And I worked more closely with him than practically anyone. I know what I'm doing. And it isn't my fault he used me to try to get you to improve."

"So you've let go of your attachment to him?" asks Akutagawa, challenge clear in his voice.

Chuuya has decidedly not. It is a little hypocritical of him to expect Akutagawa to do what he can't. But if Chuuya can't rid himself of his own bond to Dazai, he can at least help Akutagawa to push his aside enough to not let it hold him back.

"I'm not saying you have to get over whatever you feel towards him," says Chuuya, keeping his tone calm. "But you're letting it control you."

Akutagawa doesn't seem convinced, he just looks at Chuuya with a thin frown.

“Someone I greatly respect once taught me not to let my past define my future,” says Chuuya, voice going a little soft as he thinks about Arthur. His loss still aches a little. “They advised me to do what I want with my life, to not let my past experiences make that decision for me.” He gives Akutagawa a probing look. “What do you want, Ryuunosuke?”

Akutagawa meets his look for a long moment. Then he sighs and looks away.

“There was a song,” starts Akutagawa stiffly, “That Dazai and I were working on together. Called *Rashomon*.”

Chuuya has to work very, very hard to fight off a victorious grin. He keeps his expression neutral though. “That sounds like a great place to start.”

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### **December, Five Years, Ten and a Half Months Since the Release of Corruption**

“Ryuunosuke Akutagawa’s debut album *In A Grove* is the highest selling album PMR has had in years,” announces Ace, flicking his hair smugly. “And the lead single *Rashomon* has been on the top of every single chart since it came out.”

Chuuya doesn’t even find Ace’s attitude annoying for once. He’s a little smug too frankly. Things hadn’t gone perfectly after Akutagawa had showed him the unfinished *Rashomon*, but they’d figured out how to work together eventually.

Once they’d aired out their grievances Akutagawa hadn’t exactly been kind and friendly towards him, but he’d stop disagreeing with him just on principle. He had taken Chuuya’s ideas seriously, though he still shot down a lot of them. It figures that someone who had been mentored by Dazai turned out to be just as picky.

After months of long hours working on songs together and making sure the music had been up to both of their standards, *In A Grove* had come together. Chuuya is proud of it in a way he really hasn’t been since *The Literary City*. This is the first album since then that he’s worked this closely with the artist on, that had this much of Chuuya’s input.

Despite Akutagawa’s claims that he and Chuuya’s styles were completely different, that really hadn’t been the case. Ryuunosuke might not sing ballads, but his music is somber like a lot of Chuuya’s is. They both like to dig deep, to wring every possible emotion out of a song. They aren’t satisfied with something simple, they like to make something that’s heavy to listen to, that leaves an impact.

Somewhere along the line Chuuya had decided they were friends. You can’t click that well with someone on music and not start to like them. Chuuya is possibly Akutagawa’s only friend at PMR besides *The Black Lizards*. Though Gin likes him because she’s his sister, Higuchi is still a little infatuated with him, and Tachihara mostly puts up with him because he’s Gin’s brother.

Chuuya smiles when he sees the sullen prick now. Akutagawa isn’t super receptive of his friendship, but he doesn’t outright deny him either. He’s gained more respect for Chuuya throughout their time together if nothing else.

“We’re very proud of little Akutagawa,” says Mori, smile in full force (though Akutagawa would probably be livid at being called little at twenty now.) “And to his steadfast producer, Chuuya Nakahara.” He turns his smile towards Chuuya, making it a bit more sincere.

“He deserves most of the praise,” says Chuuya lightly, smirking at Mori slightly. They both know how much Chuuya had done. This had probably been Mori’s intention when he’d asked him in May, that wily fucker.

“Both of you are to be commended,” adds Kouyou, smirking a little herself. She also knows everything. She’s almost beaming a little at Chuuya.

“I’m putting together a tour to promote the album,” says Mori, shifting back to business. “I’m tentatively having April as the start date. Akutagawa is starting to work with Yoshi extensively, but he has a long way to go yet.”

The image of Akutagawa being stuck in months of stage training with The Count is so hilarious that Chuuya has to smother a snort. Akutagawa may have released one of the best albums in years, but he is *not* performance ready. Scowling at his fans while he plays for them wouldn’t help his growing fame.

“The other big announcement is that we’re now currently in negotiations with Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald to enter a mutually beneficial agreement,” says Mori.

F. Scott Fitzgerald is the CEO of The Guild, one of the few big record companies in the U.S. that isn’t in Los Angeles. Instead, The Guild’s main office is in Long Island. While PMR is more successful than The Guild in terms of having more successful and popular artists, The Guild is much more financially powerful. It helps that their CEO comes from one of the wealthiest families in America and has a network of affluent investors.

They’ve never been directly hostile with The Guild, but they’re certainly never aligned themselves with them before. The Guild has always been some of their biggest competition. But it had been clear that if either of them ever made a move against the other they would both lose too much in the ensuing battle.

“Why would we work with that dickbag Fitzgerald?” asks Chuuya. Kouyou gives him a disapproving look for the language, but it’s a fitting descriptor.

Everyone he’s ever met from the Guild is self-absorbed and looks down at artists from other labels. They’re a bunch of arrogant douches. And Fitzgerald is the worst of all of them. He’d loosely implied once that Chuuya was a charity case due to his background, and Chuuya has hated him ever since.

“I don’t trust them anymore than you do,” says Mori, smiling at Chuuya’s outburst. “But The Guild is looking to get some young blood added to their roster, and they apparently haven’t found any among their contacts. They know that recruitment and artist development is one of PMR’s greatest strengths, and they’re willing to compensate accordingly if we agree to assist them with this.”

“We’re going to help The Guild recruit someone?” asks Chuuya, not seeing the logic. Why would they give up one of their own potential artists and all the money they could make in the long run?

“That was my initial reaction as well,” says Kouyou. “Then I saw their opening offer, and it is highly unlikely that a single artist could contribute more in their entire career than what they’re willing to pay.”

Chuuya raises his eyebrows at that. How much fucking money were they talking about?

“Nothing is set in stone yet,” says Mori. “But it’s looking likely that we’ll strike a deal.”

“I’d be happy to bleed the Fitzgeralds dry,” says Ace with a smirk. Despite both being from wealthy backgrounds, their families were not friendly with each other.

“That is the goal,” says Mori cheerfully. “Speaking of recruitment, we’ve recently picked up a singer, Kyouka Izumi.”

“I’ve decided to take the girl on,” adds Kouyou, shocking Chuuya. She hasn’t really mentored anyone since himself. “At fourteen, she still needs a lot of help.”

It makes more sense then. Fourteen is a young recruit, even for them. They’d learned a lesson about the disaster child artists could be with Yumeno Kyusaku, who’d they’d had to let go after they couldn’t unleash them on the public no matter how talented they’d been.

Chuuya makes a mental note to talk about the girl with Kouyou later. He’s interested in the person who’s made Kouyou step back into the role. He wants to help make sure the girl has a smooth transition into PMR.

“Of course,” agrees Mori easily. “She’ll be in good hands with you.”

The meeting wraps up shortly after that. Chuuya tries to catch Kouyou to talk to her, but she says she has another meeting to get to. She promises to come find him later.

So Chuuya heads towards his own office, surprised to see someone already in there when he gets inside.

“Baby Red,” says Kajii, jumping up from his spot on Chuuya’s desk (which Chuuya is not thrilled he’d been sitting on). “You are never going to believe this.”

“Believe what?” asks Chuuya, walking towards him.

“You heard about that new girl, Izuko or whatever?” asks Kajii, smirking widely. “Guess who fucking recruited her.”

“Kyouka Izumi,” corrects Chuuya flatly. He’s intrigued by Kajii’s amusement though.

“Who?”

“The fucking Little Gecko,” says Kajii, cackling sharply.



“You’re shitting me,” says Chuuya automatically. Kajii just laughs harder. “Are you sure it wasn’t Gin? Or like, anyone else?”

“Nope,” says Kajii happily. “It was our resident ball of sunshine, Ryuunosuke Akutagawa.”

Chuuya’s jaw drops. “What the actual fuck?”

“*I. Know,*” says Kajii, still snickering. “Come on, we need to call a Black Lizard meeting to get the full story.”

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## **March, Six Years, One and a Half Months Since the Release of Corruption**

Dazai doesn’t spend a lot of time at the beach, but he’d gotten the craving today and decided to take a walk there. His coworkers won’t be concerned that he’s missing (besides Kunikida who will be furious and call him relentlessly, so Dazai puts his phone on do not disturb mode.)

It’s a cool day, so there aren’t a lot of other people here. Dazai is able to walk near the waves with his shoes in his hands without being stopped by anyone. It had been an adjustment after *Once More With Feeling*, being so easily recognized again. But people in L.A. tended to be the least frantic, probably because of how often they see famous people out and about.

He and Kunikida had gone on a small three month joint tour to promote *Springs Birds* and *Once More With Feeling*. The crowds had been smaller than Dazai’s past experiences, but they’d been just as lively and enthusiastic. It had been a lot of fun. Dazai had never been as obsessed with performing as some people he knows, but he’d forgotten how much he’d enjoyed it.

It had also been great to have Kunikida with him as someone to entertain himself with and to have his back. Their partnership is as strong as ever, despite Kunikida’s insistence that they are colleagues and nothing more.

Now that Tanizaki has graduated the ADA is working on helping him release his first album *Light Snow*. He’s done a lot of growing up since Dazai first met him, vocally and emotionally. He’s sure *Light Snow* is going to end up being something impressive.

They’ve also hired a new part-time employee, Kenji Miyazawa. He’s possibly the most cheerful person Dazai has ever met. He had a lovely singing voice too, though he’s very humble about it. He’s originally from some small farm town named Ihatov Dazai has never heard of and had moved to L.A. with his uncle to give singing professionally a try.

Dazai had thought Ranpo was the one they had to keep the closest eye on, but Kenji’s naivety gets him into constant jams. He seems to have no concept of people trying to take advantage of him or an ounce of street smarts. Dazai is thankful he’s with the ADA, he’s a little nervous what would have happened to him in a place like PMR.

There is truly nothing for Dazai to be discontent about. His work is more fulfilling than ever. He’s surrounded by people who he cares about and that care about him. What more could he

even ask for?

But despite his insistence that it hadn't affected him whatsoever, he's been off ever since Ryuunosuke Akutagawa had released *Rashomon* and *In A Grove*. Dazai had quite honestly never thought he'd hear that song again. He hadn't given it another thought after that meeting in October when Akutagawa's solo album had been squashed.

It had been a strange feeling, having everything he'd worked towards and been robbed of shoved in his face. And it had been a combination of Akutagawa and Chuuya's doing, which had made it even worse. The more successful *In A Grove* becomes the more unsettled Dazai gets.

He's been with the ADA for two and a half years now. Yet PMR continues to taunt him somehow. Dazai wonders if he'll ever truly be free of them. It doesn't feel like it. It feels like no matter how far away he gets or how long it's been Port Mafia Records will play on as a siren song inside his head.

Dazai is using the ocean air to try and get out of his funk, having picked up the habit inadvertently. *These waves a chorus upon the shore*, he hums to himself as he walks (if PMR is going to live in his head, he should at least play their best music.)

He almost doesn't feel the person reaching into the pocket of his trench coat. Dazai whips around to see a boy with white hair holding up a hand, expression part guilty and part desolate.

"Are you trying to rob me?" asks Dazai, smiling at the kid. This is perhaps the funniest thing that has happened to him in weeks.

"You're Osamu Dazai," says the boy in horror, eyes widening as he takes him in. "I just tried to rob Osamu Dazai."

"It's only polite to give your name when you try to steal from someone," says Dazai, smile growing even wider.

"Are you going to call the police?" asks the boy. He looks on the verge of tears.

"Not if you tell me your name," says Dazai, dropping his cheerful tone for a kinder one.

"Atsushi Nakajima," replies the boy quietly. Atsushi bows his head in shame. "I'm so sorry, Mr. Dazai. I had no idea it was you. Not that I would have been proud to rob someone who wasn't you," Atsushi rambles on. "Truly, I've never done anything like this before. But I didn't know what else to do."

"You know, Atsushi," says Dazai. "I'm pretty hungry. You want to get something to eat?"

Atsushi stutters in surprise for a moment. "Aren't you angry with me?"

"Nah," says Dazai dismissively. He gestures down at Atsushi's mangy clothes. "You're not much of a threat, kid."

Dazai ignores Atsushi's bewilderment and protests and drags him to get some chazuke after he wheedles the boy into telling him what his favorite food is. Dazai looks up the closest place that serves the dish and brings Atsushi there. He enjoys the place they end up going to, he still loves hole in the wall places like this.

Despite Atsushi's instance that he couldn't take advantage of Dazai, he ends up eating three bowls of chazuke. He gulps down the food with vigor.

"So how'd you end up needing to rob someone, Atsushi?" asks Dazai, arranging his own rice into shapes. He'd actually just eaten lunch before he came to the beach.

"I got kicked out of my orphanage last week," says Atsushi, eyes focused on the table instead of Dazai. He picks at the table with one hand. "I don't have any money on me, and I don't have anywhere else to go."

"Why did they kick you out?" asks Dazai, fighting off a scowl. What the hell kind of place just dumps kids on the street?

"The headmaster said that they didn't have enough space for everyone," says Atsushi lowly. "And I was the oldest, so they said I should be the one to go."

Dazai had been planning to get the kid a meal and be done with him, but he can't help but think of Odasaku as he tells his story. Dazai has tried to make music that helps people, but ignoring a kid who's so clearly in desperate need of help feels like it would undo all of his efforts to be a better person.

"I can probably get you a job," says Dazai lightly. "Have you ever heard of the Audio Detective Agency?"

"Of course I have," says Atsushi, eyes widening at the offer. "You'd really hire someone like me?"

Dazai pulls out some bills from Kunikida's wallet that he'd swiped from him at the office this morning. He throws them down on the table. "Well, it's up to Fukuzawa ultimately. But I've got a feeling he'll agree."

Fukuzawa acted fairly aloof, but the guy would never turn away a kid who had nowhere else to go. Even if they couldn't give him a job with the ADA, they could try to find something for him. Dazai could call Santoka too, he might have some ideas.

Dazai takes Atsushi back to the ADA with him, keeping up a constant stream of meaningless chatter as he does to avoid Atsushi's questions. He doesn't want to give the kid false hope, but Dazai is determined to not leave the boy on the streets failing to rob someone else.

"Hello, everyone," calls out Dazai as he walks into the office. He pulls Atsushi along behind him. "I have someone for you all to meet. This is Atsushi Nakajima."

"Where have you been?" demands Kunikida, stomping over to them. He glares at Dazai. "Do you have my wallet?"

“I thought we were partners, Kunikida,” says Dazai lightly, holding up said wallet. “What’s mine is yours and all that.”

Kunikida scowls and practically rips the wallet out of his hands. “And who’s the kid? We’re not running a daycare here.”

“I’m Kenji,” says the younger boy, walking up to Atsushi. He gives him a wide smile and sticks out a hand. “Nice to meet you.”

Atsushi shakes it, a nervous smile in place. “Yeah, you too.”

“Is the president in?” Dazai asks Kunikida, grinning at him.

“Don’t bother Fukuzawa with your nonsense,” says Kunikida shortly. “And answer the question.”

“Do I know you from somewhere?” asks Ranpo to Atsushi. He has his reading glasses in one hand and is squinting at the boy.

“Um, I don’t think so,” says Atsushi, the words almost phrased as a question.

“Who’s the cutie?” asks Yosano. She’s stepped out of her office to see what all the commotion is about. She walks towards them with a huge grin.

“He looks like he’s been battling raccoons,” says Naomi. She’s started working here along with her brother now. She turns to pout at her brother. “Junichiro, you should get him some clothes!”

“I don’t have any on me,” says Tanizaki, holding his hands up. She continues to argue with him about it, saying that isn’t an excuse. Meanwhile Yosano is now crushing Atsushi’s hand as she shakes it.

Kunikida is still crossing his arms and boring holes into Dazai with his stare. “I’m still waiting for an explanation.”

Dazai is tempted to say Atsushi tried to rob him just to see Kunikida’s face, but he wants him on board about helping him. Kunikida could be a bit rigid about the rules, and revealing his attempted thievery might rankle him.

But before Dazai can answer, the door to the office is thrown open. Of all the people who could have walked through it, Ryuunosuke Akutagawa is the last person who Dazai would have expected.

Akutagawa barely glances at him though, glaring instead at Atsushi.

“Atsushi Nakajima,” declares Akutagawa haughtily. “I have been looking for you.”

The recruitment of Atsushi Nakajima is a catastrophe right from the start. First of all, Mori assigns it to *Akutagawa* of all people. He'd claimed he was the right person for the job due to their closeness in age and Akutagawa's success with signing Kyouka.

It would be bad enough if it was just a botched recruitment for PMR. But Atsushi is the singer they'd offered to recruit for The Guild. They'd waited for their approval before seeking him out. The Guild had agreed to the deal.

Chuuya still has no idea how Mori tracked down the singer in the first place, but that isn't important right now. What's important is the shit storm that's followed since Akutagawa burst into the Audio Detective Agency on his own and tried to offer Atsushi a record deal but ended up insulting him instead.

It had only gotten worse from there. The ADA hadn't even known Atsushi could sing somehow, but then they'd tried to sign him themselves. If it weren't for the stupid Guild, PMR could have backed down and been done with it. But it would be a terrible move to break their word to Fitzgerald, he could do a lot of damage if they pissed him off.

Thus ensued them entering a turf war with the ADA over a boy they didn't even want for themselves. But the ADA is adamant that Atsushi should sign with them, and the kid is a gullible fool and believes them.

Akutagawa has tried to make up for his mistake by changing his mind but has been unsuccessful. He's been over at the ADA numerous times, but it has done the opposite of help. He'd gotten Higuchi involved too, and it's turned into a nasty dispute between the ADA and PMR.

The absolute worst thing though had been Dazai's recent declaration that if PMR didn't accept their defeat he would go to the police with everything he has on PMR.

Chuuya had been informed of all of this while he was on the plane by Mori, who is absolutely seething in rage. Chuuya had been in Japan when things had started, but he's been called back home now to help with damage control.

Chuuya is in an absolutely horrible mood as he arrives at PMR after getting back to L.A. He has no idea how the fuck things had come to this. He'd truly thought he would never have to interact with Dazai again after this much time had passed. But now he's popping up again just to pour another gallon of salt in the wound.

Chuuya's phone rings as he makes his way to his office, Kouyou's name flashing on the screen.

"Hey," says Chuuya shortly as he answers it.

“I’m guessing you’re aware of everything that’s going on?” asks Kouyou, her tight control slipping for once and allowing her frustration be apparent.

“Yeah, I’m up to date on the situation,” says Chuuya roughly. “Mori called and briefed me on the plane.”

Chuuya opens the door to his office, listening to Kouyou’s reply when he notices the person lounging on the couch in his office, completely at ease.

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me,” says Chuuya, freezing in the doorway.

“Howdy, chibi,” says Dazai lightly. He gives him a cheerful smile and wave.

“I’ve got to go,” says Chuuya into his phone darkly, hanging up before Kouyou can say anything.

Chuuya had thought a lot about what he would say to Dazai the next time he saw him over the years. All of that flies out the window now as he sees him in front of him.

It’s like looking at a funhouse mirror version of the Dazai he’d used to know. The basic details are the same, but it’s off. He looks older, obviously. But Chuuya had known that from seeing pictures of him online. It’s starker in person. It’s still weird to see him out of a suit. Some things are the same though, his dark eyes haven’t changed. His eyes are looking at Chuuya far too knowingly.

“What the fuck are you-,” starts Chuuya angrily before switching tactics. “What do you want?”

“I’m here on business, obviously,” says Dazai, fake smile and voice still familiar somehow despite it being so long. He sits up on the couch to face him properly.

“You’re here on business?” asks Chuuya, letting out something that would be a laugh if it weren’t so sharp and ugly. “You, who have been doing everything in your power to avoid meeting with anyone from Port Mafia Records for the past four years despite the many, many attempts to do so?”

“I know,” says Dazai, pouting childishly. “But I couldn’t avoid it.”

“What do you want?” Chuuya repeats, sharper this time, not willing to indulge Dazai’s games or whatever the fuck this is.

“You’re so serious now,” says Dazai. Chuuya wants to wipe the smirk off his face violently. “A proper executive. Mori’s trained his dog well.”

It’s the dog joke that breaks him. *Dogs are loyal, you can leave them for -*, Chuuya recalls before cutting off the thought forcibly.

Chuuya stalks across the room, leaning down so he’s face to face with Dazai. “*Cut the shit*,” hisses Chuuya.

“Oh, you haven’t changed, have you?” asks Dazai, not thrown off at all by their proximity or Chuuya’s threats. He looks even more pleased if anything. “Still a street punk at heart.”

“You’re the one that hasn’t changed.” Chuuya scoffs and backs away. “If you aren’t going to tell me what you want, I’ll just leave.”

That finally makes Dazai lose some of his bravado, his expression souring. “I did tell you, I’m here on business.”

“Ugh, I forgot how exhausting it is to have a conversation with you,” says Chuuya. He rubs his forehead in exasperation. “Is this about the kid?”

“His name is Atsushi,” says Dazai, as if he’s disappointed in Chuuya for not knowing it.

“I don’t give a shit what his name is,” says Chuuya, glaring at Dazai as if his eyes can damage him somehow. “I just found out he existed a couple hours ago. When I got dragged back from Japan. Because of you.”

“I didn’t do anything,” claims Dazai, fake innocence in his voice sounding like nails on a chalkboard to Chuuya. “Mori’s the one who called in the calvary. I just gave him a warning.”

“You threatened to go to the police with all the dirt you ever collected on Port Mafia Records,” says Chuuya flatly.

Dazai just shrugs. Fucking hell, Chuuya absolutely hates him.

“Okay, the kid. *Atsushi*.” Chuuya says the name with derision. “What about him?”

“He’s signed with the ADA,” says Dazai. “So if PMR could get that through their thick skulls and stop poking their noses in to business that doesn’t concern them, we could not speak again for another four years.”

“I don’t know anything about the details,” says Chuuya, rolling his eyes. “You know that. If you wanted a negotiation, you should have gone to Mori. Or Kouyou. Or literally anyone else.”

“I find it very unlikely that Chuuya doesn’t know *anything*,” says Dazai. He gives Chuuya another knowing look that makes Chuuya want to hit something.

Chuuya sighs deeply. He sits on the top of the piano near the couch. “I know that we’re not actually interested in recruiting him for ourselves. We were contracted by someone else to make the deal, The Guild.” He doesn’t necessarily want to give Dazai the information, but he has a feeling his threat about going to the police isn’t an idle one.

“See?” asks Dazai brightly. “I knew I could count on you.”

“Shut,” says Chuuya harshly, “the fuck up. You could have found that out from anyone. You probably just picked me because you knew it would piss me off.”

“So many years and chibi still knows me so well,” says Dazai, smirking at him as if they’re still on the same side of the joke.

“Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t strap you to a chair until you fucking deal with all this legal bullshit you’ve been putting off,” says Chuuya heatedly.

“That’s interesting you bring up legal issues considering that I haven’t asked for the songwriting credit I’m owed on *Rashomon*,” says Dazai flippantly. “Or anything I’m owed from The Corrupted Files.”

“We don’t owe you jack shit,” declares Chuuya. He scoffs. “I always did want the opportunity to tell you to your face how much *Run! Melos* sucks. The allegory is way too convoluted and the chorus isn’t impactful enough.”

Dazai’s delight finally fades. He gives Chuuya a blank look. “But you never told Mori that I was the one who wrote it.”

“As far as I’m concerned, all of your bullshit was no longer my responsibility the second you walked out of this place,” says Chuuya, shaking his head.

There’s a pause in the conversation. They both just look at each other. The tension is unbearably thick. Chuuya almost feels like he’s in a dream, seeing him face to face after all these years. (He hates himself for noting that there’s an ease to Dazai’s posture that wasn’t there before, and hates himself even more for being glad about it.)

“How the fuck did you even get up here?” asks Chuuya eventually. “Did someone let you in?”

“Mori never removed the access from my keycard,” answers Dazai. He pulls the card out of his coat pocket and holds it up.

“Mori still thinks you’re going to come back someday,” says Chuuya, rolling his eyes. He’d told the boss it wasn’t going to happen more than once, but he hasn’t been able to change his mind.

“You don’t seem to agree with him,” notes Dazai, raising an eyebrow.

“I know you aren’t coming back,” says Chuuya, sneering a little. “Thank fuck.”

“That doesn’t sound very executive-like,” says Dazai, slipping back into his stupid upbeat voice. “Shouldn’t you want whatever is best for PMR?”

“What’s best for PMR is to have nothing to do with you,” says Chuuya, giving him the coldest look he can.

“Your animosity seems to be a bit deeper than just a professional rivalry, Chuuya,” says Dazai, smile getting bigger. “Why all the hostility?”

“You *left*,” says Chuuya, before he can help himself, the word hanging in the air heavily. It has four years worth of anger in it, but there’s an undercurrent of pain to it that he hopes



Dazai doesn't pick up on.

Dazai *laughs*, and Chuuya is going to murder him someday, seriously, but then he makes it even worse when he says, "You left first. What were your words? That you should have known everything was a waste of fucking time?"

Chuuya jumps off of the piano in outrage. He can't believe Dazai is twisting his fucking words like that to make it seem like *he's* the one in the wrong, especially about the time Chuuya had reached out to him to fix things and Dazai hadn't been interested at all.

He forces himself to take a deep breath though. Chuuya is not going to give Dazai the satisfaction of seeing how much him leaving had hurt him, how much is still does. He'll take that to the grave.

"Did you get what you came for?" Chuuya asks instead, voice cold. He gives Dazai a blank look, one he'd learned from him.

"I sure did," says Dazai. He stands up and makes his way to the door, almost skipping along.

Chuuya watches him, feeling his anger bubbling up again despite his attempts to keep it down. He maintains a neutral expression with tremendous effort.

"Thanks for the help, slug," calls out Dazai as he leaves. He flashes him another huge grin as he walks out the door.

Chuuya waits five seconds. Then he throws the phone that he hadn't even realized was still in his hand the entire time at the door Dazai had just walked out of. It shatters into pieces.

## Chapter End Notes

me, an absolute clown: sure, last chapter was 43k and covered the span of a year and 4 months. but surely the chapter that covers 4 years won't be as long. perhaps it will be even shorter!

me @ me: how many lit references do you want this chapter?  
me answering me: yes

writing this chapter was nerve-racking in a way that the others weren't. it is a chapter in a soukoku fic where soukoku are only on page together once. instead, it's a true test if i've built an engaging story and can keep people's attention through loads of character development, back steps, and healing (....i am high key very nervous about it)

- Real Arthur Rimbaud died in Marseilles, plus i had to give my boy a body of water to comfort him
- Of Dawn, Of Dusk is by RL Tachihara, hence the banging drumbeat

- We are now one of eight fics to feature Santoka Taneda as a tagged character! (Dazai needed a father figure shoved down his throat, i'm not sorry) Also Taneda never used to cook before Dazai started living with him and that's why he sucks at it so much
- i now have way too much miscellaneous info about the salary and departments of the real LAPD, and how much a house costs near the real LAPD office
- i also know for a fact there are tattoo shops and clubs in marseilles
- Walking By Myself Again is by RL Taneda
- RL Hakushi Kitahara was a poet who contributed to Mori's literary magazine
- Run, Melos! is by RL Dazai, and is a reworking of Friedrich Schiller's ballad Die Burgschaft, which is based on an ancient Greek legend. The story is ultimately about a man who faces hardships but ends up saving his best friends life (AKA how Dazai wishes he would have saved Odasaku). The Robbers is a famous drama Friedrich wrote
- RL Dazai's name is Shuji Tsushima, i mixed the two together
- you can pry big bro Chuuya to Elise from my cold dead hands
- RL Rimbaud and Verlaine had a famously tumultuous romantic relationship, and those were the subjects he tended to write about
- Kajii's album is chock full of references to RL Kajii, as you can imagine. all the song titles are words by him. The song lyrics he sings at the opening are based on the opening line to his poem Under the Cherry Trees
- i get some people have Feelings about Soukoku not dating other people in their time apart, but i thought them making attempts at it fit better here (also chuuya is smooth as hell when he wants to be)
- Charles Dickens: RL writer from England. Author of Great Expectations and A Tale of Two Cities. His character here is partially based on Pip from Great Expectations (not that I've...read it), who is noted for his immature, romantic idealism
- Hagiwara Sakutarō wrote for Myōji (Morning Star), which Mori's literary magazine was considered the spiritual successor to, Howling at the Moon is the name of a free-verse collection of his
- Mary Stewart: British novelist who developed the romantic mystery genre
- Robertson Davies is a famous Canadian author, Fifth Business is his most well known novel
- Yes I did make Higuchi an arrogant Canadian. I also made Gin the older sibling. I am a Rebel, Separate Ways is one of Higuchi's works (in honor of her completing the band)
- I tried to figure out what the major industries were in Washington and hydro-electric power plants came up
- i believe that Tsujimura totally had a thing for Chuuya post dead apple (i mean, who wouldn't?)
- someone tally how many phones chuuya has broken now
- Spring Birds is by RL Kunikida
- Roppakukinsei is a book by RL Oda about two brothers, one who gets frustrated from his family and breaks off from them (to which Dazai can relate)
- William Wordsworth was one of RL Kunikida's influences
- Once More With Feeling is actually the name of the musical episode of Buffy the Vampire Slayer (which I've...never watched), but i love the title and thought it fit

extremely well here, the rest of the album is mostly RL and BSD Dazai references

if you can spare a couple words about what you thought i will be forever grateful!!

# For One Night, and One Night Only

## Chapter Summary

sometimes before things get better, they get worse

in which we finally address "after performing with Dazai earlier this year"

## Chapter Notes

i know everyone is always amazing and patient about my long update times, but this one still was rough. i've entered a more time intensive phase of my schooling, so i don't have as much time to write as i used to (｡´˘˘˙｡)

i am continually amazed by how many incredibly thoughtful comments i receive. i can't express how thankful i am. like, i am Very aware of this fic's stats (bro i spend a lot of time writing this i want it to do well!!), and this many comments is Not the status quo for a first time writer for this fandom with a novel length musician AU. and the kudos just keep flowing in. we hit 300 and then sailed by it. just know i appreciate all of you!!

but for your personal planning, this bad boy is 43k buddy, grab a glass of water

i'd say this chapter is more of an even split dual POV chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

## January 25th, Three Hours Since the Release of Arahabaki

Dazai is severely regretting his decision to never get a driver's license of his own as he power walks from the ADA office towards the direction of Port Mafia Records. He's trying to keep his emotions in check, but he's having a hard time when his pulse is racing and his mind is going even faster than that.

If Chuuya had done this because of him, because of the things that Dazai had said in his fury in August or October, he will never forgive himself. He hadn't meant it, not a single word. He'd just been so angry and frustrated. He'd wanted to strike back at Chuuya after he'd taunted him with perfectly delivered barbs.

Dazai would *never* have imagined Chuuya would take his words seriously enough to release the song that had been so damaging to himself at sixteen, the song he'd reviled even more than *Corruption*.

Dazai dials a phone number as he walks, drumming his fingers against the case impatiently as he waits for the person to pick up.

“Just because you helped me with Kyouka does not mean you have permission to use this number,” says Kouyou when she answers.

Dazai ignores that completely. “Where’s Chuuya?”

There’s a pause before she responds. “Why do you want to know?”

“Where is he?” repeats Dazai, barely keeping a calm tone.

“He’s in his apartment,” says Kouyou with a sigh. “He said he wanted the morning to himself.”

“Which is where?” asks Dazai, losing his grip on the calmness a little bit now.

“In the same building he’s lived in since he was fifteen,” says Kouyou irritably. “Top floor now. You need the key code to get in.”

“Kouyou Ozaki, if you do not give me the code I swear you will regret it,” declares Dazai, not even caring about sounding calm anymore.

Kouyou gives him the code, though she sounds extremely put out about it. She starts to say something else, but Dazai hangs up on her.

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### **Late March, Nearly Six Years and Two Months Since the Release of Corruption**

Dazai swings open the door enthusiastically as he walks into the ADA, and it hits the opposite wall with a satisfying thud. He has a bright smile on his face as he strolls inside. (It might be the fakest expression he’s ever worn in the vicinity.)

Most of his coworkers are in the main office, surrounding the large table Kunikida had dragged into the center of the room to serve as their “strategy center” since this whole fiasco began. Ranpo calls it their war room and uses it to store his snacks on (much to Kunikida’s ire).

Ranpo is eating a bag of chips in a chair at the far end of the table, and he waves a hand lazily as Dazai walks into the room. Kenji and Tanizaki are sitting on one side of the table, and Atsushi is sitting across from them. Their heads all turn to face Dazai when they hear the bang of the door against the wall.

Kunikida is standing up near the head of the table, having clearly been pacing. He stops and looks up as well when Dazai enters, though his facial expression is much darker than the others.

“And where, exactly, have you been?” demands Kunikida (Dazai should seriously have been keeping a running tab of how many times he’s asked him that, it’s got to be up in the hundreds by now.) Kunikida scowls and crosses his arms. “We all usually tolerate your

frequent absences, but this is hardly the time for one of them. Particularly when you're the only one who knows anything that could potentially be helpful about dealing with Port Mafia Records."

"I stopped by PMR to see an old nemesis," says Dazai casually. He keeps his grin in place as he strolls into the room. He leans against the back of the empty chair next to Atsushi. "It was very illuminating."

It had also been a lot of other things besides illuminating, but Dazai isn't going to reveal any of those right now.

His brain had tried to recognize him as Chuuya Nakahara, PMR executive and professional rival. His heart had just gone *there you are* (it remains to this day the most useless organ in his body.). It had been perhaps the worst and most excruciating dichotomy he'd ever been exposed to.

*If you wanted a negotiation you could have gone to Mori. Or Kouyou. Or literally anyone else*, Chuuya had said, accusing Dazai of trying to piss him off. In reality, Dazai hadn't even made a choice. The second he'd decided things had escalated enough he needed to go to PMR he'd known Chuuya would be the one he sought out.

He can't decide now if he regrets the decision or not. Dazai had gotten the intel he'd needed to help the ADA and Atsushi. He should be thinking of it as a definitive win. Instead, he feels like he'd just torn off the bandaid of a wound he'd deluded himself into thinking had healed and is bleeding all over the place.

Thankfully he's not enough of a mess that his coworkers can see how much he's reeling. It helps that Dazai had taken the long way back to the office, walking with the ocean beside him as he'd left PMR (he's supposed to absolutely loathe the place, not feel nostalgic about the salty air and sounds of the waves.)

Anyway, these are all deficiencies that he can address later, when he's alone. Dazai will keep his shit together for the rest of the day. Then when he's by himself in his apartment later he can torture himself by analyzing and replaying the encounter over and over again in his mind, should be a fun evening.

But right now, the ADA needs him. So Dazai winks at Atsushi as the boy looks up at him with wide eyes before turning to smirk at a bewildered Kunikida. He seems to be wavering between being shocked and being annoyed.

"You just walked right in there?" asks Kunikida, eyebrows furrowed in disbelief.

"PMR isn't actually interested in signing Atsushi," announces Dazai, ignoring the question. He shifts to a more serious tone (his ADA version of serious, much lighter than his PMR one had been). "All of the pieces are falling into place now. It didn't make sense why they were so adamant about signing an unknown artist who wasn't interested. They have tons of other artists, one failed recruitment shouldn't matter to them."

None of his coworkers interrupt him (which is a rare occurrence), but Dazai guesses they might still be surprised about his willingness to go to PMR and that he's openly talking about them this much. Ordinarily whenever the record company comes up Dazai just makes a disgusted face and whines until they change the subject. He's had to speak about them more this past week and a half since he'd met Atsushi than he had in his past 2 and a half years at the ADA.

"But PMR was asked to negotiate a contract on behalf of The Guild," continues Dazai, "So it would reflect very poorly on them if they were unsuccessful." He keeps his face impassive as he delivers the news, observing his coworkers reactions.

Ranpo doesn't look very surprised, not that he ever does. He simply nods, taking in the new information thoughtfully. Tanizaki has the sour expression he always wears whenever PMR comes up. Kenji has his head tilted in contemplation, a bit more serious than usual but still carefree for the most part. Atsushi's expression is more difficult to understand. He seems to have some conflicting emotions, but he ends up looking down at the table and frowning slightly.

"Why is The Guild so interested in him?" asks Kunikida. He seems to be taking the new information in stride, though Dazai can tell he's slightly uncomfortable.

"That I don't know," says Dazai with a shrug. "I've only met F. Scott Fitzgerald a handful of times. Not that I'd have wanted to interact with him more, his pompous and elitist attitude is nauseating."

"And why would The Guild go to Port Mafia Records instead of just trying to recruit Atsushi themselves?" asks Tanizaki. He looks less sour now and more confused.

"A very good question, Tanizaki," says Ranpo. He puts down his empty chip bag and crosses his arms while leaning back in his chair.

"Did your...contact at PMR give you any more details?" asks Kunikida. He tries to keep his face blank, but he can't stop his small frown.

"Even getting that much out of them was a chore," says Dazai, whining dramatically. "We're not exactly pals, Kunikida."

"I'm going to speak with the president," says Kunikida. He walks towards the hallway that leads to the president's office. "I'll update him on the situation and see if he has any thoughts about The Guild's motivations."

Dazai doubts he'll know anything, but he doesn't try to stop him. He kind of feels like this whole day is happening to somebody else and he's just watching. He clutches the chair in front of him a bit tighter to fight off the feeling.

"You all have work that you could be doing," calls out Kunikida as he exits the room, fixing them with a grave look.

Tanizaki and Kenji take his advice, moving over to Tanizaki's desk to look at one of the songs for Light Snow, which has mostly taken a backseat since Atsushi has arrived. Tanizaki is handling it better now than he would have when Dazai had first joined the ADA. He seems a little disappointed, but he isn't letting that stop him from helping Atsushi.

Ranpo pulls out his phone and starts tapping on the screen. Dazai always has trouble figuring out if he's playing a game or working on a song, both options are equally likely.

Dazai exhales a little sharply and walks over to the coffee pot in the break area, pouring himself a large cup. He's not physically tired right now, but he's emotionally exhausted.

"Want a cup, Atsushi?" Dazai asks him while glancing at him over his shoulder. He'd noticed he's still looking down at the table with a forlorn expression.

"Is there any tea?" asks Atsushi, shaking his head slightly. He stands up and walks over to join Dazai at the counter. "Or coffee is completely fine if there isn't any."

Dazai can't fight off the automatic frown. He's so on edge even a *beverage* is making him lose it. "You're a tea drinker?" He manages to keep his voice mostly neutral as he grabs a tea bag and fills a mug with water to heat up in their ancient microwave.

"I, uh, read it was good for the vocal cords somewhere once," says Atsushi sheepishly.

"Never understand why people want to drink stupid grass water," mutters Dazai under his breath. He hands Atsushi the mug with a bright smile though after it's done heating up.

"Thanks," says Atsushi softly. He dips the tea bag in the mug to steep it absentmindedly. He doesn't move to drink it while it's boiling hot though (which is another unpleasant memory Dazai has to shove down forcefully, this day feels like a god damn *century*).

Dazai turns his attention towards Atsushi's obvious distress instead. He hasn't known Atsushi very long, but the kid isn't very subtle about his emotions. He tends to wear his heart of his sleeve. Dazai can tell he's clearly upset about something but trying to put on a brave face.

"Something wrong?" asks Dazai easily, keeping his voice low enough that nobody else in the office can hear him.

"What?" asks Atsushi, blinking rapidly. "No, nothing's wrong."

Dazai finds some amusement in how different his own and Atsushi's abilities differ when it comes to lying. He fights off a smile though to keep his face neutral. "Are you sure?"

"It's just..." says Atsushi, staring into his tea instead of looking at Dazai. "You guys have done so much for me, and I feel terrible that I've caused the ADA so many problems. And Port Mafia Records didn't even really want to sign me." His voice grows quieter on his last sentence, just the slightest tremble in the words.

Dazai frowns and drums his fingers against his coffee cup as he contemplates Atsushi's words. For the ADA, it's a good thing that PMR isn't invested in Atsushi. It will make dealing with them simpler. For Atsushi, it's a bit more complicated.



He's not sure if Atsushi is sharing his feelings with Dazai because of Dazai's own experiences with PMR or because he trusts him the most out of everyone. Atsushi has been sticking pretty close to Dazai since Dazai dragged him here after his attempted robbery. Either way, Dazai can help to put his mind more at ease. He might not be able to fix his own horrendous mood, but he can help Atsushi with his.

"Ogai Mori is a lot of things," says Dazai, looking Atsushi right in the eyes. "But there is no one I know with better instincts about which musicians are going to be successful. It's frankly a little frightening how he always manages to find the most talented people." He gives Atsushi a small grin. "I'm not sure why The Guild went to PMR to recruit you, but I know Mori would never get involved in a business deal that he thought would make Port Mafia Records look bad. He never would have agreed to it if he thought you weren't capable."

Atsushi's eyes are a little bright as they look back at Dazai, his mug is shaking the slightest bit. Then he ducks his head and says softly, "Thanks, Dazai."

"I'm just telling the truth," says Dazai with a shrug.

"It's not that I wanted to sign with them," says Atsushi, clearing his throat to sound steadier again. "I don't. I just..."

"You don't have to explain yourself to me," says Dazai brightly. He smiles at Atsushi widely.

"I'm going to do my best to make it up to you," says Atsushi, tone more earnest than melancholic now. "To all of you. You took a chance on me when you had no reason to."

"I wouldn't say we had no reason to," says Dazai, smirking a little. "We did get a new singer out of it."

Atsushi smiles at him, shaking his head. Then he glances around them and his expression shifts to a more worried one. Dazai internally sighs, preparing himself for more self-doubt, which is why Atsushi's question catches him so off guard. "Are you okay?"

Dazai almost chokes on his coffee. He swallows roughly, then fixes Atsushi with a blank look, raising an eyebrow. "Why wouldn't I be okay?"

"You said you went to see someone from Port Mafia Records to get the information," says Atsushi, concern evident in his voice. "From what everyone has said, it sounds like you aren't on very good terms with anyone from there. It must have been uncomfortable."

"Eh, it was nothing," says Dazai flippantly, trying to brush him off without being rude. He smiles lightly. "I've had paper cuts that have bothered me more."

"Alright," says Atsushi, accepting Dazai's lies easily. "Thanks for the tea." He gives Dazai one last smile before going to join Tanizaki and Kenji, offering to help them with the song they're working on.

Dazai watches him go, keeping a cheerful expression on his face. Then he turns and faces the counter again, setting down his coffee and cleaning up the slight mess he'd made while

preparing the drinks (which is wildly out of character for him, but he needs a moment to himself right now.)

Now that there isn't anyone who can see him, he allows his expression to drop. Once he's done tidying up Dazai picks up his coffee again and stares into it blankly, his throat catching pathetically despite his earlier resolutions to keep his shit together.

What would he have said to Atsushi if he were being honest? *Actually, it was hell. My former partner made it abundantly clear how much he loathes me. Despite everything that's happened, I feel the exact opposite towards him.*

But while Dazai is equally touched and disturbed by Atsushi's concern, he certainly isn't looking to unload his problems on anyone, especially not a timid kid with his own issues. Dazai is determined to fight down these feelings. He will not allow himself to falter, not now when the ADA actually needs him.

Dazai chugs the rest of his coffee then sets the mug down on the counter roughly, leaving the dirty cup sitting there (to make up for his earlier cleanliness). He then fixes a smile on his face as he walks over to join Atsushi, Tanizaki, and Kenji to try and give them some guidance on the song they're working on.

Three days after Dazai had strolled into Chuuya's office and turned Chuuya's entire life into a fucking shit show, Mori calls an executive meeting. The atmosphere is incredibly tense in the room. Even Ace isn't his usually arrogant self, he's sitting quietly in his chair with a neutral expression.

In other circumstances, Chuuya might find that amusing. In the present, Chuuya has never been further from laughing.

After he'd been able to breathe normally after Dazai had left his office (which had been much longer than Chuuya would like to admit) he'd gone immediately to see Mori to tell him everything. Or rather he'd told him the details that were relevant to PMR and kept the nasty personal business to himself.

Mori hadn't seemed surprised about Dazai showing up after four years of radio silence. If anything, he'd looked less stressed than when Chuuya had spoken to him on the plane. But Mori had just thanked Chuuya for updating him and then moved on to discussing their next move.

Mori had asked Chuuya to take over some of Mori's work for the time being so that Mori could focus on dealing with the current situation. People's faces had been pretty bewildered

when Chuuya had been the one to walk into meetings Mori had been the one to set up. Chuuya has just been jumping straight into business though, he never explains why the boss isn't there. No one has questioned him on it so far.

It's a good thing Mori's workload is fucking astronomical (Chuuya has no idea how the man does it all regularly) because it keeps Chuuya from having time to think about Dazai.

Chuuya had never fooled himself into believing he'd gotten over what had happened with Dazai. But he'd been able to push it aside, he hadn't been letting it hold him back. But seeing him in person, hearing his voice and witnessing his ridiculously fake expressions, he'd been forced into acknowledging all the feelings he'd tried for so long to bury.

Chuuya is still angry, in fact he's more pissed off than ever that Dazai had waltzed right into his life and asked Chuuya for information so casually. But the strongest feeling he'd felt from that encounter hadn't been anger. If anything, he's most angry with himself. He's not the same person he'd been four years ago, he's changed. But his feelings for Dazai haven't changed at all. If anything, seeing him again made his absence burn more than it had in years.

Chuuya isn't going to allow his control to slip now though. He's missed Dazai for years, just because it's stronger now doesn't mean he has to let it affect him. Chuuya is determined to take down those bastards from the ADA, Dazai included. He keeps reminding himself not to let his personal feelings get in the way. This isn't about him, it's about PMR.

"Thank you all for rearranging your schedules," says Mori to begin the meeting. His facial expression is difficult to make out. It's not his fake cheerful one, but it's not his calculating one either. "I appreciate your dedication these past couple weeks. PMR is lucky to have all of you."

Chuuya is barely able to fight off giving the boss an incredulous look. Mori isn't one to waste his time on compliments, not unless he wants something. And usually if he does give one, it's targeted towards the person he needs something from. It's unusual for him to praise all of them at once.

Chuuya glances quickly at Kouyou to gauge her reaction, and he can see she is also wary. He quickly looks back to Mori as he continues speaking though.

"The deal with The Guild is off," announces Mori, keeping his tone devoid of all emotion. "We no longer have any interest in Atsushi Nakajima. I've informed Ryuunosuke of this and instructed him to focus on his upcoming tour exclusively now."

Chuuya once again has to work to keep his expression blank. They were giving up? That is so unlike Mori it's insane. He also should probably check on Akutagawa later if he gets a chance, he's probably livid.

"Fitzgerald wouldn't have stood for that without some sort of penalty," says Ace. Ace doesn't hide his own shock and displeasure. Chuuya is almost impressed he's willing to openly ask Mori about this when the man is exuding such a dangerous energy.

“I can handle Francis,” says Mori, smiling for the first time. It’s sharp rather than cheerful though. “It’s nothing any of you need to worry about.”

No one speaks up this time. They all just nod deferentially.

“Our focus now is the success of Port Mafia Records,” says Mori. His tone is finally gaining its calculating edge, which is insanely relieving. “Akutagawa and his upcoming tour are a priority. I’ve also made the decision that Kyouka is to start working on an album.”

“I don’t believe she’s ready for that,” says Kouyou. Her expression is neutral, but her eyes are cold as she looks at Mori.

“I wasn’t aware that I was asking for your input, Ozaki,” says Mori flatly. He returns Kouyou’s look, challenging her to disagree with him further.

Kouyou’s entire body goes rigid, but she nods and fixes her gaze at the table instead of at Mori.

“Excellent,” says Mori, switching to a bright tone. “As you’re so close with her, you can assist her with it. I’m sure you’ll make fast progress.” The words are heavy with expectation.

“Of course,” says Kouyou. To most, she sounds perfectly calm and agreeable. But Chuuya knows her well enough to see how she’s absolutely outraged under the surface. Mori probably can too, but he either ignores it or doesn’t care.

“I look forward to seeing the end result,” says Mori easily. “Those were the major announcements I wanted to cover. I don’t want to keep you from your work. It’s a critical time for Port Mafia Records. We can’t afford any screw ups.”

It’s a dismissal and an order. Kouyou gets up to leave almost immediately. She’s perfectly poised as she exits the room, and Chuuya winces as he watches her go. He’ll have to go talk to her later too.

She’s fiercely protective over Kyouka, even more so than she had been over himself when Chuuya was a teenager. If anyone other than Mori had done this Kouyou would have eviscerated them. Actually, Chuuya is a little worried she’s going to do something stupid to defy the boss anyway. He is not looking forward to having that conversation.

Ace also leaves the room, but Chuuya doesn’t. He stays in his chair and waits until the door shuts behind Ace so that he and Mori are alone.

“Did you need something?” asks Mori. He crosses his arms and leans back in his chair.

“Just trying to understand something,” says Chuuya mildly, “Because it seems to me like you’re happy that The Guild called off the deal.”

It takes Chuuya a moment to realize that the sound coming out of Mori’s mouth is laughter. He’s never heard the boss laugh before. Mori is smiling widely as he chuckles.

“It’s a relief to no longer have to pretend to play nice with everyone,” says Mori, still grinning. “But now we can simply destroy the people who are trying to challenge us.”

“How are we going to do that?” asks Chuuya, more confused than ever. They’d just pissed off one of the most powerful people in the music industry. There is sure to be consequences. Not to mention there’s still the ADA to deal with.

“You can leave that part to me,” says Mori confidently. “I’m going to need you to stick around in L.A. for a while though and take over the music projects I’d been working on. We won’t win this without the help of everyone. I could also use your assistance keeping Kouyou in line.”

“I’m sure she’s going to do her best to help Kyouka,” says Chuuya, forcing the words to come out casually with extreme effort. He would never say anything bad about Kouyou, not even to Mori.

“Of that I have no doubt,” agrees Mori. “But that’s not what we need right now.”

“I can offer to help her with Kyouka,” says Chuuya, barely fighting off a sigh. Now he’s dreading talking to Kouyou even more than before. The last thing he wants right now is to get in the middle of some kind of turf war between Mori and Kouyou. Hopefully he can somehow steer them away from a conflict.

“In ordinary circumstances I would have allowed Kouyou to dillydally until she arbitrarily decided the girl was ready, but we can’t afford that kind of delay right now,” says Mori with a small frown. He leans his head against one of his hands. “The girl is ready vocally, and things are about to get very complicated soon. We need a strong showing a force right now that Port Mafia Records is steadier than ever and capable of producing successful artists.”

“Has The Guild made a move yet?” asks Chuuya, not able to hide the concern in his voice. He’s never been this worried about PMR before. They’ve always seemed infallible ever since he’d signed here when he was fifteen. He had never doubted they could make it though anything unscathed. He’s extremely unsettled by the possibility they could be entering a real challenge to the company he thinks of as his home.

“Not yet,” says Mori. He smiles, more violently than cheerfully. “This is a preemptive move. It’s often said that whoever strikes first is the one to win in war.”

Mori’s savage enthusiasm helps to put him at ease. There’s no one else he’d rather have in charge of steering PMR through this. The boss has never lost before. Chuuya will do whatever it takes to support him so they make it through this.

“Then we better be sure to strike hard,” says Chuuya with a dark smile of his own.

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### **Early April, Six Years, Two Months, & One Week Since the Release of Corruption**

Things have been going eerily smoothly for almost two weeks now. Right after Dazai had suffered through the ordeal of going to PMR to get information (an experience that still

plagues him more than he'd like), PMR had seemingly decided to pull back. They hadn't had any contact with them since. Akutagawa hasn't been anywhere near the place with his insulting and ineffective recruitment strategies.

Dazai's coworkers think it's a good thing. They've been in good spirits with the new state of things. Atsushi is starting to settle into the ADA, though he still tends to hang around Dazai the most. Everyone is doing their best to welcome him and get him into the groove of things at the ADA.

Everyone thinks their dealings with PMR are behind them. Everyone, that is, except for Dazai.

Because Mori has never given up on *anything* in his entire life, and Dazai highly doubts he would start now.

The more time that passes without them hearing anything from PMR, the more unsettled Dazai becomes. He keeps his apprehensiveness to himself though. He doesn't want to ruin things for everyone on the off chance he's being paranoid. He doesn't have anything concrete to back up his theory beyond his personal experiences with PMR, and that's still something he can't bring up easily (even though he'd been drilled on information about them the previous couple weeks).

Dazai is sitting at his desk currently, tapping his pen against the wood to help him deal with a chorus that's giving him some trouble and to annoy Kunikida (a double whammy). Ranpo and Atsushi are sitting at Ranpo's desk while Ranpo is giving Atsushi a beginner's lesson on songwriting (it's a lot more bragging than actual instruction.) Tanizaki and Kenji are in Yosano's office doing some edits (Tanizaki's expression had been very grim as they approached the door.)

Dazai smiles when he feels Kunikida rip the pen that he's tapping out of his hand.

"Stop that," commands Kunikida. "That never actually helps you when you're struggling. It's just noise."

"I find it therapeutic," argues Dazai, crossing his arms. "The noise keeps me from thinking too hard."

"I don't think any of us have ever worried about you thinking too hard," says Kunikida snippily.

That gets a laugh out of Dazai. He can always rely on Kunikida to be himself even when Dazai is jittery and trying to hide it. He allows Kunikida to steal his pen and lets out a dramatic sigh.

"You look at it then," whines Dazai, tossing the sheet music at Kunikida so that it almost hits him in the face. Kunikida snatches it out of the air before it can though.

He glares at Dazai and opens his mouth to start delivering what is sure to be a long and winding series of complaints when the sound of the door to the office being flung open cuts

him off.

Dazai seriously wonders if they should start locking the thing.

A very tall man with short platinum blonde hair strolls into the room. His tan suit is high-end, as is everything else he's wearing. He glances around the room as he walks towards them, his nose wrinkling in disgust.

"Jesus Christ, this place is a *dump*," says Francis Key Scott Fitzgerald. His words are dripping in condescension. He looks at the space with a combination of amusement and pity. He smirks at no one in particular. "I mean, I'd heard it was *small*, but this is so much worse than anything I'd imagined."

He continues looking around before snapping his fingers and pointing a finger gun at Atsushi, moving towards him with a huge smile. "There you are! Atsushi Nakajima, right? I'm Francis Key Scott Fitzgerald." He reaches Atsushi and sticks out a hand confidently. "CEO of The Guild."

"Um, Mr. Fitzgerald," says Atsushi awkwardly. "What are you-."

"I've been looking forward to meeting you, kid," says Francis, cutting him off with another wide grin. He takes back his offered hand and places it on his hip smoothly. "You're quite the vocalist."

"What are you doing here, Francis?" asks Fukuzawa, appearing in the doorway that leads to his office. His tone is hard but not impolite, and he's giving Francis a stern look.

"Yukichi!" calls out Francis, turning to give him a wink. "Still rocking the traditional look I see. It's been too long, old sport. You're getting old and grey!" His voice is light and cheery with an undercurrent of mocking everyone can hear.

Fukuzawa's expression doesn't change. "I believe I asked you a question."

"Still such a spoilsport," says Francis, shaking his head. "I'm here to meet Atsushi, of course. I made the mistake of having Mori try to set up the initial meeting, a blunder on my part." He sighs dramatically. "Never send a rabid dog to do a man's job, eh, Yukichi?"

"Atsushi has signed with the Audio Detective Agency," says Fukuzawa. His voice and face stay calm as he walks towards Francis. "I think it would be best if you left."

"Ah, you see," says Francis holding up a finger and cocking his head, "I don't think that contract will hold up. Because Atsushi, the dear boy, is only seventeen. And I don't believe you got parental consent."

"I'm an orphan," Atsushi speaks up, frowning at Francis. "I don't have any parents to consent."

Francis turns towards Atsushi and gives him a pouty look. "Now, what would poor Nick Carraway think if he heard you say that?" he asks, a slight smirk on his face. Atsushi freezes in place. "He's been worried sick about you, running away from home. But fret not!" Francis

smirks fully now. “I told him I’d tracked you down. He was so relieved to hear you were alright.”

“He kicked me out,” says Atsushi angrily, a side of him Dazai has never seen before. He practically spits the words at Francis. “He’s *not* my parent.”

“That’s an interesting story,” says Francis with a shrug. He pulls a document out of his suit jacket and holds it up, pointing to a signature on it, the name *Nick Carraway* clearly visible. “But I have a feeling mine’s the one that’s going to hold up in court.”

“I asked you to leave,” says Fukuzawa. He no longer looks calm. He’s giving Francis one of the coldest looks Dazai has ever seen from him. “I won’t ask again.”

“Ugh, why is this even a problem?” asks Francis, turning back to Atsushi. “I’m offering you a silver platter here, kid. You should be jumping up and down to take it.”

“I’ve signed with the ADA,” says Atsushi. He gives Francis a cold look of his own.

Francis sighs again, running a hand through his hair. “You want to be a singer, don’t you? I can make that happen, make you rich beyond your wildest dreams.”

“I can be a singer here,” says Atsushi, not backing down at all. Dazai is impressed with the glare he’s giving him. It’s a surprise coming from the timid boy Dazai’s known these past few weeks.

Francis barks out a laugh. “You think you’re going to be successful *here*?” He gestures around the room in disdain. “Do you even know anything about these people you’re working with?”

“Yukichi Fukuzawa,” says Francis, pointing at the president, “Who plays the part of an *honorable man* these days when he’s frankly lucky not to be in jail for what he’s done in the past.”

“Ranpo Edogawa,” continues Francis, flicking a hand at Ranpo, who’s watched the entire exchange from on top of his desk with a small frown that’s now growing larger. Ranpo is actually paying full attention for once. “The only thing bigger than the list of songs he’s written is his ego. Yet no one is ever going to care about him because he has absolutely no musical talent himself whatsoever.”

“Failed child star Akiko Yosano,” says Francis, twirling to face her. Dazai hadn’t even noticed her and the others entering the room, he’d been too caught up in the spectacle. She looks like she wants to tear Francis limb from limb, her eyes boring into him and her arms crossed.

“I guess she can be proud she didn’t end up working on the streets or with a drug addiction like some of her other washed up counterparts,” says Francis with a shrug. Tanizaki grabs Yosano by the arm to keep her in place.



“Doppo Kunikida.” Francis says the name with pure contempt as he gives Kunikida a disparaging look. “The musical equivalent of watching paint dry. He’s never going to be anything other than opening act material.”

Francis turns again, but then pauses with a frown. “And I’ve literally never even heard of the rest of you.”

“You will,” says Tanizaki shortly. He’s glaring just as much as Yosano.

“Doubt it,” says Francis with a snort. He holds up a finger as if he’s remembered something. “Oh, except for you, Osamu.” He faces Dazai and gives him one of his widest smiles. “You know, I saw your parents a few months back in Morocco. Although they didn’t mention *you* at all.” He shrugs. “Ah, well, you are a little forgettable. Haven’t done anything worthwhile since you were seventeen.”

Nobody else has lost their temper at Francis’s taunts, and that is the only thing that keeps Dazai from taking back his pen from Kunikida and jamming it into the slimy asshole’s eye. Instead, he just gives Francis a huge grin in return.

“Though it is a bit of an upgrade that you’ve ditched that street urchin Nakahara,” continues Francis, shaking his head. “What an uncouth brute. I try not to judge, but new money can be so *tacky* in the hands of those unprepared for it.”

“Say hi to your daughter for me, Francis,” says Dazai, not thinking before the words come out. He’s smiling with all his teeth.

Francis loses his smug air for the first time, slipping into an enraged expression. He opens his mouth to reply when Fukuzawa cuts him off.

“I believe we’ve all made ourselves quite clear,” says Fukuzawa, raising his voice just the slightest bit. It’s so out of the ordinary it makes the whole room listen. “You may have Atsushi’s former guardian’s signature, but you don’t have Atsushi’s, which is the most important one. Leave this office.”

“Fine,” says Francis shortly. “Do your best to make Atsushi a *star*. I’d love to see what you come up with. It’ll be entertaining to watch you fail. This is far from over.”

Francis straightens his suit jacket haughtily and walks out of the office with the same arrogance he’d walked in with. He leaves the door wide open as he leaves (which is possibly one of the funniest displays of disrespect Dazai has ever seen, but he’s too furious to appreciate it.)

It’s quiet for a moment after he’s gone. They’re all looking towards the open doorway, most of them glaring or with expressions of disbelief.

“He’s lying,” says Atsushi to break the silence. He no longer sounds determined but distressed. His hands are trembling a little. “I didn’t run away. They kicked me out.”

“We believe you, Atsushi,” says Dazai, surprising himself by speaking up. But Francis has awoken a fire Dazai hasn’t felt in ages (funny, he hadn’t noticed how lacking in motivation he’d been without his hatred towards Mori spurring him on.) “We’re not going to let him walk all over us.”

“Indeed,” says Fukuzawa, giving Atsushi one of his rare smiles. Then he turns towards Dazai with a less kind expression. “Though we don’t have to stoop to his level with cruel personal matters.”

“Sorry,” lies Dazai easily. Ranpo snorts in the background. Dazai has to resist giving him the finger.

“What are you talking about?” asks Tanizaki, giving them a confused look.

“Francis’s daughter was in a terrible accident years ago,” says Kunikida, giving Dazai his own disappointed look. “She’s been in a coma ever since.”

Dazai could point out that Francis started it but holds his tongue. He just puts on a blank expression and looks towards the president, waiting for their next directions.

“When’s your birthday, Atsushi?” asks Fukuzawa.

“May 5th,” answers Atsushi, looking surprised at the change in subject.

“Good,” says Fukuzawa. “That’s not too long from now. Once you’re eighteen, we’ll have you sign a new contract. I doubt Francis will get very far before then.”

“He’s a powerful man,” says Kunikida, frowning and adjusting his glasses. “I’m not sure it would be wise to not take his threats seriously.”

“He’s powerful from a certain point of view,” says Fukuzawa, crossing his arms. “I don’t see having money as power. I judge a man based on his talents, his virtues, his accomplishments. By those measures, Francis is no threat to us.”

“That being said,” says Fukuzawa with a sharp nod. “That doesn’t mean I’m going to allow him to disrespect us or our company like that.” His eyes are full of determination. “We may not be as big or as have as many resources as places like The Guild or Port Mafia Records, but we know music. That’s what’s important.” He turns to look at Atsushi. “Our new top priority is starting to work on Atsushi’s debut single.”

“A single?” asks Yosano. She crosses her arms. “Not a full album?”

“Eventually, we’ll put together a full album,” says Fukuzawa. “But we need to make a strong showing of force as soon as possible. Speed is of the essence in conflict, whoever strikes first wins.”

Dazai almost falls out of his chair at the unexpected words, having flashbacks to hearing Mori say the exact same thing practically verbatim. He’s never been able to puzzle out exactly what type of relationship Fukuzawa and Mori had in the past (not that he’s wanted to

examine it all that closely, anything having to do with Mori is best kept at a distance in his book.) The president looks over at him because of the noise and meets his gaze steadily.

“Atsushi is a talented singer, but he’ll need some fairly intensive vocal training to get to a professional level,” says Dazai, voicing his opinion partially to hide his surprise and because it’s the truth. “He’s not ready to put out anything with the state his voice is in now.”

Usually Dazai would sugarcoat his opinion more to sound less abrasive, but right now bluntness seems like the best course of action when they were up against someone like Francis. And Mori, who Dazai is more sure than ever isn’t going to take Francis’s dismissal without some sort of countermeasure.

Fukuzawa doesn’t look surprised, he nods in agreement. “That’s why I’ll need you to train him, Dazai. You’re familiar with the effective training methods Port Mafia Records uses, and you’ve got an ear for inaccuracies in tone and pitch. I’m confident you can help him get his voice in recording shape quickly.”

Dazai takes his new assignment in with a mixture of shock and pride. The president doesn’t place his trust in others easily. He’s placing a large amount of stock in Dazai’s abilities. He’d never requested him to work with Tanizaki or Kenji on their singing (even though they honestly both could really use it.)

Fukuzawa is also silently requesting something else of him, for him to be a mentor to Atsushi. It’s clear the boy needs some help with things beyond vocals. Dazai has tried to skirt around his obvious lingering issues from his old home life and pitiful levels of self-esteem, but now he’ll have to face them head on. It’s almost impossible to create worthwhile music while you’re in a state of inner turmoil, Dazai has witnessed that first hand (which is not a time in his life he’d like to revisit now or ever, ideally.)

It’s a lot of pressure, for a multitude of reasons. If he fails, Atsushi could lose the second chance he’s been given at the ADA. The Guild isn’t as nasty as PMR, but Dazai actually wants him to stay here. He’s surprised how invested he is in the future of this random kid he’d picked up off the beach on pretty much nothing but instinct. He wants to help him grow into a successful singer.

Another reason it’s a big responsibility is that Fukuzawa is staking the reputation of the whole ADA on this. It could be disastrous for the whole company if Dazai fucks this up. It’s a huge contrast to the cold way the man had declared he didn’t trust him when Dazai had first joined the ADA. It’s clear Fukuzawa trusts him now.

Then the last reason Dazai feels apprehensive towards this new task is that this will be the first time he’s tried to mentor someone since Ryuunosuke Akutagawa, one of Dazai’s greatest failures. He’d done a terrible job then, professionally and personally. He’d taken out his own frustrations with his career and relationships on Akutagawa, and the boy’s constant refusal to progress had infuriated him.

In the end, he and Akutagawa had been nothing but mutually destructive towards each other. It’s why he’s never offered to help out the younger artists at the ADA in a substantial way. That experience had been a dark part of his life that Dazai isn’t looking to repeat.

It's another confrontation of Dazai's former self and who he's trying to be now. They seem to be popping up all over the place lately. First Akutagawa had literally barged back into his life, then he had that torturous confrontation with Chuuya that he's still shamefully brooding over, and now he's being offered a second chance to take a stab at the task that had obliterated his career when he was eighteen.

"I won't let you down, sir," says Dazai lightly. He gives the president a huge smile then turns to give Atsushi the same grin.

Dazai has been letting his past rule his present far too often lately. He might not be able to tackle all of his own unresolved issues with PMR and everyone from there, but he can help Atsushi navigate his own problems. He'll make a real singer out of him, help him to be the best musician he can be. The kid gloves are coming off.

"I know you won't," says Fukuzawa simply. He then turns to Tanizaki, who's trying to look like he's not crushed about the current situation. "We're not going to give up on Light Snow, Tanizaki. I still want you to keep working on it, it's shaping up to be very impressive. I'm assigning Kunikida to help you."

Tanizaki looks so relieved it's almost comical. "Thank you, sir."

"We'll get it done," promises Kunikida confidently. He gives Tanizaki a nod of support.

"Ranpo, we'll need you to continue to keep the ADA in good standing with your expert songwriting," says Fukuzawa, facing the boy who's been uncharacteristically quiet since Francis left. Fukuzawa gives him a serious look. "You are one of the greatest assets this company has, and anyone who doesn't recognize that is a fool."

"You don't have to tell me that, Mr. President," says Ranpo with a huge smile. It's clear how much the words mean to him though, his body language is a thousand times more at ease. "I'm the greatest songwriter in the world!"

"Of course," says Fukuzawa with just the slightest hint of amusement. He addresses the room at large then. "I detest quarreling between record companies. It detracts from the music in a distasteful way. But that doesn't mean I won't fight back when someone brings the fight to me. I'm sorry this situation has arisen, but I am confident that we will conquer this challenge. I have the upmost faith in all of you."

Dazai can see how touched everyone is by the man's words. The president is a fairly serious man, but he cares deeply about people. He also doesn't say things he doesn't mean.

Dazai lets a small, honest smile on his face. Their adversaries are nothing to scoff at, but he's glad they have someone like Yukichi Fukuzawa at the helm to guide them. Dazai might not agree with him on everything (Dazai still thinks rules are made to be bent deep down), but the president is not someone he'd like to go up against.

"Let's get to work," says Fukuzawa solemnly.

Everyone springs into motion at his words. Dazai beckons Atsushi to join him. He's surprised when Fukuzawa walks towards his desk too.

"Dazai, could you call Taneda?" asks Fukuzawa once he reaches Dazai's desk. "I'd like his opinion of the legality issue with these contracts."

"It's not really his area of expertise," points out Dazai. Despite never taking an active interest in Santoka's work, he's absorbed the details of it inadvertently over the years, just like he'd absorbed Santoka's strange taste in books and affinity for canned tomato soup.

"But he probably knows someone who would have a better idea," adds Dazai after thinking about it. Santoka is well-liked by a great deal of the LAPD. Plus Dazai doesn't mind calling him even if he doesn't know anything. He's one of the only people who ever manages to make Dazai feel more settled even when they don't really talk about anything.

"Thank you," says Fukuzawa with a nod.

"Should we take a moment to consider our options before acting hastily?" Kunikida asks the president before he leaves. "The ADA is already in a precarious position when it comes to competing with other record companies for stadiums and venues. Wouldn't it damage our reputation if a legal matter like this comes out?"

"There are some times when doing what is technically right and doing the right thing do not coincide," says Fukuzawa, tone serious but not unkind. "This is one of those times."

Kunikida doesn't look fully convinced, but he doesn't raise anymore protests. He's frowning a little at the ground as the president walks away to go back to his office.

"Who's Taneda?" Atsushi asks him. His facial expression is complex, a hundred different emotions at war with each other. Fear, distress, and eagerness are some of the frontrunners.

"My old roommate," says Dazai with a smile. "Let's head to the music room, Atsushi. I want a room with good sound quality to run some scales."

Later that day he and Kunikida are the only ones left in the office. Dazai had sent Atsushi along after a full day of listening to him do a number of scales and some simpler songs. Atsushi had been trying his hardest, and Dazai had tried *his* hardest to point out the numerous flaws without discouraging him. Luckily, Atsushi had seen his shortcomings as motivating rather than demoralizing.

Dazai had stuck around under the pretense of coming up with a vocal training schedule for Atsushi (something he could do in his sleep, really.) In reality, he wants to talk to Kunikida

once they're alone. He's been giving off quietly disgruntled vibes all day.

Dazai doesn't bring anything up though. The best way to approach a disgruntled Kunikida is to let him come to you. Dazai might take a lot of pleasure in messing with Kunikida, but that's all lighthearted fun. Having serious conversations with him is much more difficult.

Kunikida finally cracks half an hour after everyone else has left and Dazai is starting to run out of fake typing to do.

"What are you doing here so late?" asks Kunikida from his spot at the desk next to Dazai's. He giving him a suspicious look. "What are you up to?"

"Who says I'm up to something?" asks Dazai lightly, turning to face Kunikida fully. He raises an eyebrow.

"When are you not up to something?" asks Kunikida, crossing his arms.

"Are you still fretting about Francis's threats?" asks Dazai, keeping his tone as neutral as he can make it. He keeps his expression free of judgement as well.

"Don't ask questions you already know the answer to," says Kunikida shortly. He frowns slightly.

"There are many things that you could be sulking about," says Dazai with a half smirk. "Perhaps your favorite stationary store stopped selling your brand of pen."

"Those people still give me dirty looks when I go in there," says Kunikida, his frown growing more pronounced. "I have no idea how you offended them so deeply when you only bought a gift card."

"Those people are even more uptight than you are," says Dazai, waving a hand dismissively. Then he switches to a more serious voice. "Francis is not to be taken lightly, but neither should Fukuzawa."

Kunikida sighs and shuffles in his chair a bit. "I'm not saying I don't think we should help Atsushi," he says, a conflicted expression on his face. "He seems like a good kid, a few troubling self-esteem issues, but kind. I just don't want to the rest of us to go down with him if that's who they're aiming for."

"I don't think anyone would disagree with your desire to protect the ADA," says Dazai, words much kinder than he usually delivers them. The "but" is very clearly implied though.

"I feel like I'm the only one seeing the situation logically," says Kunikida, frustration obvious in his voice. "Organizing the joint tour for Spring Birds and Once More With Feeling took months of hard work and persistence, and one of the reasons we were able to do it was because of the ADA's image as reliable. Without that I'm not sure we would have been able to get the venue contracts we needed, even with the boost in recognition we got from the success of both those albums."

Kunikida adjusts his glasses as he continues. “What if next time we try to set up a tour we’ve lost that image? What if Tanizaki never gets a chance to play for a live audience? What if we lose everything in our carelessness?”

“Those are fair concerns,” says Dazai, nodding his head. “And I’m not going to deny that there is a possibility that those things could happen.” Dazai looks Kunikida directly in the eyes. “But I think the world is a bit less rigid than that. Not everything is black and white. Personally, I’ve done things that were reprehensible to attain success, and with much less noble reasoning.”

Kunikida’s eyes widen. It’s rare that Dazai will openly talk about the things he’s done at PMR. It’s not that he’s ashamed of them exactly. He doesn’t have that strict of a moral code. His issues with the deal with Mimic Industries mainly stem from who got caught in the cross fire. If it hadn’t been Odasaku, there’s a chance that Dazai might still be working for PMR. Not that he’s upset with how things have turned out. He’s satisfied with the path he’s chosen.

“Our actions matter,” continues Dazai steadily, “And our bad choices aren’t wiped away by our good ones. But people are complicated, and they are more than one single decision. Signing one seventeen year old without parental consent doesn’t change who the ADA is at its core. Francis might be able to stir up some controversy due to his name and his finances, but I think others will be able to recognize who’s in the right here regardless of the law.”

Kunikida sighs even deeper this time. “Those are also fair points,” he says evenly. “And deep down I do believe helping Atsushi is the right thing to do. I just don’t want to have this company suffer because of the backlash.”

“Your dedication to the ADA is admirable,” says Dazai honestly. There is no teasing in his voice.

Kunikida looks even more surprised than when he’d talked about his former indiscretions. Dazai isn’t very free with his compliments, but he is sincere about this one. Kunikida seems touched by the praise.

“I want this company to succeed,” says Kunikida, his expression shifting from frustrated to determined. “But I suppose the best course of action is to put my faith in it and my coworkers instead of doubts. That would be the more useful to everyone.”

“Now he gets it,” says Dazai obnoxiously, smirking widely and throwing up his hands in celebration. “You sure took your sweet time, Kunikida.”

“You’re much easier to deal with when you’re not putting on a show, you know,” says Kunikida, rolling his eyes. “I hope you have people who you can drop all these acts with.”

Dazai’s smile slips a little. He does have people who he can be himself around. Santoka, Odasaku, even Kunikida himself once in a while. But he’d lost the only person who he’d ever been able to be fully honest with. Dazai has done a remarkable job of not thinking about Chuuya today after his taunt to Francis over his rage at him and his insults towards Chuuya.

But Kunikida's words hit him like an unexpected knife to the heart. It's ridiculous how he's been more upset about Chuuya this past month than he had been in years. Not that he *hadn't* been upset these past years, but it feels inescapable now no matter what he does to distract himself.

*(It's because you saw him, whispers his mind traitorously. You were subjected to everything you long for, and now you can't deny the longing hasn't lessened with time.)*

Dazai chooses to change the subject rather than subjecting himself to more of that unbearable topic. "You don't need me to cheer you up about the whole musical equivalent of watching paint dry thing too, do you?" he asks lightly. "I have to give Francis points for creativity but his deductions for inaccuracy outweigh them heavily."

Kunikida scoffs. "Like I care what some rich boy thinks of my music. At least I didn't buy my way into a recording contract."

Dazai actually bursts out in laughter at that. It's not often that Kunikida will openly insult someone who isn't Dazai. Kunikida can't fight off an answering smile.

"Vicious, Kunikida," says Dazai in approval, still chuckling a little. "So let's work to take him down together, okay?"

"I'm in," says Kunikida with a nod. He drops the smile for a more serious expression. "The Guild won't know what hit them."

For Kunikida, it truly is as simple as that. Once he sets his mind to something, he does not waver in his commitment. Dazai is relieved he's no longer conflicted about it. The ADA will have the best chance of winning if all of their players are in top shape.

"They won't indeed," says Dazai with a smirk.

*"There are people who it is insufficient to say that they are unforgettable," sings Atsushi earnestly. The song sounds distinctly different in his higher voice than in Kunikida's deeper one, although not in a bad way. "People who have helped you in some significant way. Those who have sworn no oath to you, who owe you no affection. To them you are a stranger, but there are some people in this world that you can just never forget."*

Atsushi is standing at one of the microphones in the ADA's music room while Dazai listens from his spot sitting at the table in the room and jots down notes. The page is also filled with doodles that Dazai draws while Atsushi has to repeat lines in order to get them right.



The song he's singing currently isn't all that challenging vocally, and Atsushi is doing an adequate job with it. They've been at this a few weeks now, and Dazai is pleased with the amount of progress he's made in that time. Atsushi's voice has a fairly impressive range, he just has to be less afraid to go for the higher notes. It's impossible to hit them if you don't approach them believing you can do it.

Dazai figures the best thing he can do for Atsushi is to be honest with him about his abilities. He doesn't have any experience dealing with this kind of issue. Dazai has never had problems with confidence in his own singing, and it's laughable to consider Chuuya doubting his singing prowess. But he knows that it isn't enough for Dazai to *tell* Atsushi he's good enough. What really matters is that Atsushi himself believes he is.

So Dazai is open with him about his successes and his failures. The first time he'd tried to sing *The Hell of Mirrors*, a popular song Ranpo had written, he'd been upfront that the song was beyond Atsushi then and they should try something else. But he'd also made sure to let him know his version of *The Fiend With Twenty Faces*, another of Ranpo's song that he'd sold to Arthur Conan Doyle, was even better than the original.

Overall, Atsushi seems to be slowly coming into his own. It's not a simple thing, confronting the parts of yourself you find lacking, and Dazai recognizes that. He attempts to lessen the load for Atsushi, but he's mostly just running on instinct. Atsushi hasn't complained at all. He's dedicated to getting his voice into recording shape as soon as possible.

However, choosing Kunikida's song *Mist on the River* might not have been Dazai's best choice. The lyrics are poking a little too close to thoughts that Dazai would rather avoid while he's working on music. It's annoying how someone can ruin a song for you simply by association.

Atsushi finishes the verse and doesn't continue with the rest of the song. "Sorry," he says, sounding a little awkward. "I think I need a water break."

"No problem," says Dazai easily. He stands up and grabs a water bottle from the stash they keep in the music room. He tosses it to Atsushi who catches it with a grateful smile. Dazai smiles back and sits back down.

Dazai is trying not to be harsh with Atsushi, but he had been adamant with him about being upfront about his voice's limits. He'd told him that if he was going to ignore and abuse his instrument they'd never get anywhere and that he should never hesitate to ask for a break or admit when something felt wrong. He'd said that singing is just like training any other skill, if you push your body beyond what it can do it'll actually hamper your progress.

Atsushi is following his orders, though he still looks apologetic about it every time he speaks up about something. Dazai counts it as a win. Even if Atsushi is a little uncomfortable at least he isn't pushing himself too hard.

Dazai really doesn't think Atsushi needs a different personality to be successful as a musician. He's met all types of artists throughout his career, and there isn't only one way to act. Atsushi's kindness and consideration for others isn't a weakness. The only thing that

needs to change is his reluctance to acknowledge how talented he is. Dazai has no interest in forcing him into being someone he isn't.

Atsushi takes a long drink of his water, letting out a content sigh as he puts the cap back on the bottle. He walks over to take a seat next to Dazai at the table. "How was that?"

"Just the slightest hint sharp on the second chorus," says Dazai plainly. "But good tone and pitch throughout the rest of the song."

"Good to know," says Atsushi, nodding in thought. "Would it be okay if we tried something different? Not that I have a problem with Kunikida's music," adds Atsushi quickly. "It's all very good! But his voice is a lot deeper than mine, and I'm not as familiar with the songs."

Dazai could point out that singing something out of his range is kind of the point, but he's too intrigued and excited about Atsushi actually asking for something he wants to give it a chance. "What did you have in mind?"

"Would you mind if we used some of your music?" asks Atsushi, hands fidgeting a little with nerves.

Dazai has to fight off a victorious grin. He is so going to work into conversation with Kunikida later than Atsushi had wanted to sing his music rather than Kunikida's. He'd tampered down his competitive streak a bit since he was a teenager, but this is too good an opportunity to pass up.

"I'm flattered, Atsushi," says Dazai mildly. He pulls out his phone to bring up the sheet music. "What song from Once More With Feeling were you thinking?"

"Actually, I, um, meant your older stuff," says Atsushi, flushing and looking even more nervous. "Double Black songs."

Dazai has to bite his tongue so he doesn't let out a wild laugh. One day, he'd like to just go *one fucking day* where he doesn't have to think about his old partner. Dazai hasn't seen or heard anything about him since he'd spoken to him in March, yet he's always waiting in the recesses of his mind.

Atsushi seems to pick up on his less than enthusiastic response despite his attempts to maintain an unaffected expression. "We don't have to," he says worriedly. "Forget I said anything."

"It's not a big deal," lies Dazai with a steady voice. "It's just everyone else around here tends to avoid music from PMR like the plague. People don't often ask to sing any of it."

"I don't really get that," says Atsushi with a small frown. "They've put out some of my favorite songs. I know they're our rivals, but it seems weird to completely ignore all their music."

"I'd say it has more to do with personal reasons than professional ones," says Dazai, shrugging a little. "I agree PMR's music is some of the best out there. But I tend to keep that

opinion to myself.”

“Does everyone hate The Guild now too?” asks Atsushi. Dazai is surprised by how annoyed he sounds. “Because I really like some of their artists too. *Moby Dick* is a classic.”

Dazai also wouldn’t have anticipated Atsushi to be a Herman Melville fan. *Moby Dick* came out way before Atsushi had been born, before Dazai had been born. Dazai supposes he’s never really asked Atsushi about his taste in music before. It had never come up. That may have been an oversight on his part.

“I would never tell you which music you should like,” says Dazai, keeping his tone light. “That’s completely up to you. But part of being in the music business is dealing with all of the extra stuff beyond the music, even when it goes against your personal opinions.”

“I guess that makes sense,” says Atsushi, still looking disheartened. “It’s going to be strange to have to get used to though.”

“I’m open to working with music from PMR,” says Dazai calmly. “I’m obviously familiar with it as well. There’s a lot of material to pick from, but I think we should stay away from Double Black songs.” He crosses his arms and tries to keep his voice free of emotion. “It would be hard for me to be objective about them after hearing them in Chuuya’s style so many times, and I don’t think you’re ready to go up against him vocally.”

Dazai had made that mistake when he’d been working with Akutagawa. It had not panned out well. Akutagawa is talented, but he’d never been able to measure up to Chuuya’s singing. Dazai had kept pushing him to try and force him to, but it had never worked. Instead Dazai had just gotten frustrated the person who was singing wasn’t Chuuya, and Akutagawa had been sullen he wasn’t able to live up to Dazai’s expectations.

Dazai does not want to go through that again with Atsushi. He’s already thinking about Chuuya much more frequently than he’d like to these days. He is not looking to add even more fuel to that fire.

Atsushi doesn’t seem upset by his refusal. He nods and takes another drink from his water bottle.

Dazai is starting to think about which of PMR’s songs would be best for Atsushi to practice with when Atsushi speaks up again.

“Can I ask you something?” asks Atsushi, tone a little hesitant. He looks Dazai right in the eyes though. “Why did Double Black split up? I heard it happened before you left Port Mafia Records. I always wondered what happened.”

It’s honestly a very good question, one that Dazai isn’t completely sure of the answer to. So many things had happened simultaneously. It’s hard to pinpoint one single thing to explain it all. It had been Mori, and Arthur, and Odasaku, and Dazai not getting on that fucking plane to Japan. But it was also Chuuya leaving and never looking back until he snuck a test on Dazai that he’d failed because he *didn’t even realize it was happening*.

Dazai isn't going to try and wade through that mess with Atsushi though. He's surprisingly not as annoyed with the question as he would have expected to be. Atsushi has probably asked him more about his personal life in the time he's met him than his coworkers have in the the past couple years. His interest is personal rather than professional.

It's a perplexing phenomenon, how Dazai seems to attract all these kind people all while not being very kind himself. There's a part of him that's confused as to what he's done to deserve it.

"It's a little complicated," answers Dazai eventually. He keeps his voice neutral. "I guess you could say it came down to creative differences."

Atsushi accepts his answer with a thoughtful look. Then he thankfully changes the subject. "How do you feel about trying something by Motojiro Kajii?"

This time Dazai can't hold back his snort. He has quite a few opinions on the man. He focuses on his musical ones though.

"That's a good choice," agrees Dazai, trying to smother his amusement at Atsushi unknowingly still picking Chuuya's music. "How about *Beneath the Cherry Trees*?"

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### **April 29th, Six Years & Three Months Since the Release of Corruption**

"I can't believe we're in the literal desert this year instead of at the beach," says Higuchi from her lounge chair. Her eyes aren't visible through her sunglasses, but Chuuya just knows she's rolling them.

"I can't believe you're still bitching when we literally rented out the entire pool area of one of the nicest hotels in Las Vegas," snaps Tachihara from the chair next to Chuuya. His eyes *are* visible as he rolls them and brings his colorful drink up to his mouth to take a long sip.

"Princess Maple is just upset that her beloved Akutagawa isn't here," says Kajii from the chair in between Chuuya and Higuchi. He's smirking widely.

"Poke fun at Canada one more time, Lemon Boy," says Higuchi, lifting up her glasses so he can see the full force of her glare. Chuuya isn't convinced she won't try and tackle him. "I *dare* you."

"You gonna call me a hoser?" taunts Kajii happily.

"You guys are annoying Chuuya on his birthday," says Gin flatly. She sits up from her spot next to Tachihara to give them all an unimpressed look. "Chuuya, let's swim."

Chuuya laughs at her bluntness and gets up to follow her into the pool. "Right behind you."

The original plan for his twenty third birthday had been for his friends to meet him in Tokyo and for them to do their usual beach celebration. Obviously that hadn't worked out when Chuuya was called back to L.A. indefinitely.

Normally, Chuuya wouldn't mind being asked to stay at home. He loves L.A. He still gets homesick for the stupid city when he's gone for too long. Chuuya always feels more at ease with his favorite ocean by his side and the sounds of L.A. around him.

But things aren't exactly normal right now.

Chuuya has always been a hard worker. He's never minded putting in long hours. He'd rather spend time on a project getting it right than put out something not up to his standards. But Chuuya's workload has gone up staggeringly since March. Although most of it has been things he's enjoyed working on.

Mori has saddled him with overseeing a bunch of PMR's albums in development. He's never worked on so many at the same time before. For the most part everything is going pretty well. Hakushu Kitahara's new album *Heretics* is set to release next month. Sakutaro Hagiwara is putting the finishing touches on *Principles of Poetry*. Chuuya has a bunch of other artists who are on track with their albums, writing, and recording.

There is one glaring exception that isn't going well, Kyouka Izumi.

Chuuya's fears about Kouyou resisting Mori's decision for her to start working on an album had not been unfounded. The first time he'd gone to speak to her about it she'd told him there was no way she was letting him force Kyouka into something she wasn't ready for. Chuuya had tried to reason with her, but it had just turned into a nasty argument. She hadn't been interested in hearing his opinion on the matter.

Mori has shown no signs of changing his mind. He is determined for this album to happen, with or without Kouyou's support. He'd asked Chuuya to be the main producer on the album. Then he'd asked Hirotsu to assist them as well. Mori asks for progress updates regularly and his impatience with their lack of results is very evident.

Chuuya is caught between two people who he both cares for and greatly respects. It's fucking terrible. Every time he tries to push Kouyou into some sort of compromise she completely shuts him down. They've had more terse interactions these past couple weeks than they've had in ages. It's making Chuuya extremely irritated.

"You're letting your grudge about having to release music when you were younger cloud your judgement," Chuuya had snapped at her one day when they were in Kouyou's office alone and having the same conversation for the hundredth time this month. "Kyouka isn't you."

"Because your career and relationships weren't affected at all by releasing music at such a young age," Kouyou had thrown back in a calm tone, her voice full of mockery.

Chuuya had needed to storm out of the room in order not to shout something hurtful back in return. It had stung though, and Kouyou had never apologized. They'd just continued with the new coldness that had settled into their relationship these days.

In his honest opinion, Kyouka is vocally ready for an album. She has a strong voice for a fourteen year old girl. He thinks she could easily pull off making a really good record, if she

gave it her all.

She is decidedly not giving it her all.

Chuuya isn't sure if it's due to Kouyou's influence or Kyouka's own feelings, but she's been dragging her feet about making real progress on the album. They try out song after song but nothing ever seems to work. He can't bring it up to her either because Kouyou is always there, and Chuuya may be frustrated with her but he isn't looking to burn the bridge between them for good.

It is also absolutely the worst timing for Kouyou to be pulling this stunt. On the surface, nothing at Port Mafia Records has shifted. But he and Kouyou are both know what's really going on.

F. Scott Fitzasshole has been doing everything he can to sabotage Port Mafia Record's reputation. It's been extremely subtle. Francis isn't an idiot, he hadn't put out a public message about the dispute between The Guild and PMR. Instead, he's using his connections to sour the relationships between PMR and their partners from all sides of the music industry.

Merchandise suppliers they've worked with for years are suddenly demanding to negotiate new contracts. Concert stadiums they've booked with ease, and have kicked other artists off the schedule when they've had to, are starting to reject their offers. It seems like there is a new crumbling partnership almost every week to deal with.

As Kouyou is largely the one in charge of their business relationships, she is very aware of this. Yet she continues to try and stall Kyouka's progress at every opportunity. It's infuriating. Chuuya sympathizes with her reasoning, but not when it might come at the expense of the entire company.

Chuuya doesn't get exactly what Mori is plotting to rectify the situation, but the boss seems to be deeply involved in some strategy these days. Chuuya rarely sees him. When he does see Mori it's very brief. Mori isn't interested in discussing much unless it's something that needs his direct attention.

Chuuya has been surprised that he misses getting to talk through work things with him. He'd never been absent enough for Chuuya to notice before. And every time they do talk Chuuya has to navigate the tricky balance between being honest about where Kyouka is at but not throwing Kouyou under the bus. Chuuya might be annoyed with her, but he'd never say a bad word about her.

Chuuya had danced around the fact that Kyouka hadn't been putting in the full amount of effort she could be, but Hirotsu had been blunt about it the first time he'd been asked after he'd been put on the project.

"She's not trying," the old man had reported plainly. "That's why we're not getting anywhere."

Chuuya couldn't be mad at Hirotsu for telling the truth, he'd just been doing his job. But Mori had been very displeased that Chuuya had tried to skirt around that fact. He'd never said anything directly, but there's a new tension to their conversations about the project that hadn't been there before.

To sum it up, he's having a shit fucking time right now, and it's all due to one stupid little album (or lack of album). By attempting to placate both Mori and Kouyou he's just made both of them more pissed off, and Chuuya really has no idea what the best way forward is. It's not like he can ask his friends for advice either really. The information about what's going on with The Guild is being kept under wraps, and without that knowledge the importance of Kyouka's album doesn't really make sense.

The Black Lizards are still in limbo right now without a singer, and Chuuya has also been getting pressure to fix that as soon as possible as well. But he's been able to put it off by pointing out the band couldn't keep changing singers every couple years and expect to maintain a following. Mori had accepted that reasoning, but he's still annoyed at how long it's taking to find a suitable replacement.

Not to mention that on top of all of his problems at work, ever since he'd seen him in March Chuuya is constantly thinking about Dazai. It's like seeing him in person had been the gust of wind that had taken down the house of cards he'd built around his feelings for him. He's on his mind more than he'd been in years.

Chuuya's anger and darker feelings towards him haven't lessened, but it's harder to pretend that isn't all he feels. He *misses* him, pathetically so. Especially with his recent clusterfuck of issues at work, he misses the days when everything had been so simple. He and Dazai had been at each other's throats a fair amount, but not with music. Music had always been the one thing they were in perfect sync about.

Chuuya hadn't been paying attention to his upcoming birthday. After he'd called off the Tokyo trip he hadn't expected them to do anything. He really hasn't had much time to spend with any of his friends lately. He'd been surprised when Tachihara and Gin had burst into his apartment this morning without any warning.

"Get moving, birthday boy," Tachihara had called out loudly. "We've got a plane to catch."

Chuuya had been standing in his kitchen making himself tea before he went into work. "What the fuck?"

"What he means to say is happy birthday," Gin had said, elbowing Tachihara in the stomach. "And that we've got a surprise for you."

Chuuya had opened his mouth to protest that he had to go into the office today but Tachihara had cut him off before he could.

"You appear to be under the impression this is an offer," Tachihara had said with a huge smile. "It's not. This is a kidnapping. You're coming with us."

"It's true," Gin had said gravely.

Chuuya had laughed and gone along with them to the PMR jet for the short flight to Las Vegas. Kajii and Higuchi had been waiting for them when they'd arrived. Akutagawa had been absent for the first time due to being on tour (Chuuya is surprised how much he wishes the jerk were here.)

After throwing their stuff in their suite when they'd gotten to their hotel they'd gone straight to the pool, each with a ridiculously fruity cocktail in hand. It had probably been the first time in a long while Chuuya had been this relaxed.

Chuuya jumps into the pool after Gin with a large smile on his face. He's missed his friends. He's extremely grateful they'd done this for him. It had been the best kind of surprise.

"So how long have you been planning this?" asks Chuuya once they both come up for air.

"It was mostly Tachihara's doing," says Gin. She floats almost effortlessly in the water. "He's been obsessing about it for weeks." She does a very unflattering imitation of Tachihara's voice. "Gin, do you think Las Vegas is too lame a destination? Gin, do you think I picked the right hotel? Gin, do you think I've drummed so hard I've lost all my brain cells?"

Chuuya almost gets a mouthful of pool water he laughs so hard. "Classic Mich."

Gin smiles softly, a look she doesn't wear often. "Yeah."

She quickly stops smiling when Tachihara cannonballs into the pool right next to her, splashing her directly in the face with water. She glares at him once he comes up to the surface.

"Thought I'd join you guys," says Tachihara brightly, ignoring her glare completely.

"Seven out of ten cannonball," says Chuuya with a smirk. "Points off for shoddy technique."

"I can do it again," says Tachihara with an answering smirk. He then lets out a cry as Gin slaps water into his face.

They squabble for a moment while Chuuya relaxes in the water. It's not the same as the ocean, but he's still having fun. Although he greatly prefers the smell of salt to chlorine.

"You having a good time?" asks Tachihara after he and Gin have stopped fighting. He tries to keep his tone casual, but it's clear how invested he is in the answer.

"This is perfect," says Chuuya honestly. "Seriously, thanks."

Tachihara looks thoroughly relieved. "Good," he says while nodding. Then he sighs deeply. "Are you doing alright, man?"

Chuuya stops floating and stands up in the water to look at him properly. "What do you mean?"

"You've just seemed a little...on edge lately," says Tachihara carefully.



“I told him not to say anything,” says Gin, shaking her head.

Chuuya mulls over his response. He is on edge, more so than he can ever remember being. He imagines saying everything he’s actually feeling.

*Mori and Kouyou are at war while I’m caught in the middle. I’ve got more work than I’ve ever had before in my life. And I’m still agonizing over the same bastard I’ve been stuck on since I was sixteen.*

“Work is pretty intense right now,” says Chuuya, figuring that’s as much as he can reveal. “But it’s not anything out of the ordinary.”

“Anything we can do to help?” asks Tachihara. Gin nods in agreement, offering his services as well.

“You are helping,” says Chuuya with a smile. “This is helping immensely. I needed a fucking break.”

Tachihara smiles back. “At least you haven’t broken any phones in a while.”

At that Chuuya is the one to splash him in the face. Gin laughs next to him while Tachihara sputters in outrage. Chuuya laughs too, the most carefree one he’s had in a long time.

Tachihara is distracted from retaliating when a loud shriek comes from where they’d left Higuchi and Kajii. Kajii has Higuchi over one of his shoulders, and she is pounding on his back with her fists and scrambling to get away from him.

“Put me down, you maniac!” screams Higuchi as Kajii ignores her and walks over to the pool calmly. “Let go of me or I will-.”

Higuchi stops talking to let out a squeak of panic as Kajii tosses her in the pool. He then jumps in right after her with a wide smile on his face.

Chuuya is prepared for Higuchi to start yelling at Kajii the second she resurfaces. It’s clearly what Kajii expects too. They’re both shocked when she instantly throws herself at him to dunk him instead.

“Take a breath,” she says viciously as she allows him to come up for air for a moment before shoving him under again.

The rest of them burst out in hysterical laughter. Higuchi starts to smile as well despite herself. She stops trying to drown Kajii and settles for punching him as hard as she can in the arm.

“Ah, killer punch, Gucci,” says Kajii, rubbing his arm. “You taking lessons from Baby Red?”

“You just bring out the worst in people,” says Higuchi, but she’s still smiling, and there isn’t any real heat to her insult.

Kajii sticks his tongue out at her, and it's peaceful just for a moment as they all cool off in the water. For not being that far from L.A, Vegas is way hotter. Chuuya's glad they have the space to themselves. He can't imagine dealing with a crowd today.

"I am not complaining this time," says Higuchi, pushing her wet bangs out of her face. "But I'm just saying there are pools in L.A."

Kajii groans loudly. "I will drag you out of this pool so I can throw you back in."

"I was just curious," says Higuchi sharply. She does swim a little further away from Kajii though.

"This place is amazing," says Gin loyally. Tachihara beams at her. "We always go somewhere for Chuuya's birthday."

"The beautiful city of Las Vegas was chosen for its luxurious accommodations and plentiful entertainment options," adds Tachihara, doing a voice that makes him sound like an air headed tour guide. Then he drops to a more normal voice. "Plus Chuuya hates being in L.A. on his birthday."

*Next year we will be in L.A*, supplies Chuuya's mind automatically before he can fight it off. He has to hold back a scowl. He's twenty three now, but he feels like he'll never grow out of being an idiot who can't let the past die.

"Higuchi is just trying to complain enough to make up for Akutagawa's absence," says Chuuya to change the subject. It gets the reaction he'd been hoping for. Higuchi pouts and crosses her arms while the others snicker.

"It's not like we have anything better to do back home right now," says Tachihara, rolling his eyes. "We mostly just dick around on our instruments. We're in musical lockdown until we get a new singer."

"I've been able to keep Mori from shoving a placeholder in the band," says Chuuya with a slight frown. "But I don't think I'll be able to hold him off forever. Finding someone sooner rather than later would be better."

"If you guys are looking for a singer," says Kajii, raising an eyebrow at the group, "Why would you not ask the original lizard?"

The atmosphere of the group changes immediately. It goes from lighthearted to brimming with tension. Chuuya sees Tachihara, Gin, and Higuchi all freeze in place. Chuuya stares at Kajii with wide eyes, because if he's joking around about this he thinks Kajii might end up getting punched for real.

"That's not funny." Gin is the first to speak up. She's giving Kajii one of the coldest stares Chuuya has ever seen from her. Tachihara has a hand on her shoulder for support.

"Who says I'm kidding?" asks Kajii, dropping the mockery from his tone and crossing his arms.

“You fucking dropped us to go solo without question,” says Tachihara angrily. Actually, he’s possibly holding onto Gin to keep himself in check. “Why the hell would we want you back? So you can just ditch us again when it suits you?”

“Okay, are we pretending like I’m not the one who started the fucking band?” asks Kajii, going from sincere to annoyed.

“You lost any claim you had to it when you left,” says Tachihara coolly. His eyes are hard as they look at Kajii. It’s a stark contrast to how much they usually get along.

“I’m not sorry I went solo,” says Kajii plainly with a shrug. “It was what I wanted. The fame, the people screaming my name, getting to be in full control of the music, the awards, I loved every second of it.”

“This is very convincing,” says Higuchi, tone extremely callous. While she’s been snippy with Kajii all day, there’s a deeper level to it now. She isn’t messing around anymore.

“If you would fucking let me finish,” snaps Kajii before exhaling harshly. “Yeah, going solo was awesome. I don’t regret it at all. But honestly, I had way more fun back when I was playing with you guys.”

“And you’ve suddenly realized this now?” asks Tachihara, clearly not moved at all. “Because we’ve been without a singer for practically an entire god damn year, and you never said a thing.”

“What, are you going to make me fucking *beg*?” demands Kajii. Tachihara just looks at him blankly in response.

“I mean, I could do another solo album,” says Kajii, tone full of barely contained frustration. “And it’d be another bestseller, no question. I could tour the entire world again.” Then Kajii loses his bravado and speaks with uncharacteristic earnestness. “But if I had the choice, I’d rather play the music I love with my best friends than go at it alone.”

It’s quiet for a moment as everyone lets that sink in. Chuuya isn’t sure if he feels like he’s intruding. If it were him, he’d have let up already. But this isn’t his band on the line. He remembers how pissed Tachihara got at him when he’d pulled Akutagawa out of the band, he’s not looking for a repeat of that by getting involved.

Still, Kajii’s sincerity is making Chuuya feel for him. Chuuya’s always been lucky that the music he loves to make has been wildly successful. But if he had to make a choice, he’d rather make the music he wanted over success.

Chuuya is a little surprised Kajii doesn’t want to be solo anymore. He’d seen how full of energy he’d been when The Literary City first came out. But looking back, he really hadn’t put forth a major effort towards a second album since he got back from his insanely long tour for it. Chuuya has been fairly preoccupied with his own shit lately, but he kind of feels like a crap friend for not picking up on it.

“Well, Gin, should we put him out of his misery?” asks Tachihara, a half-smirk on his face as he leans in close to her and flicks his eyes back and forth between Gin and Kajii.

“If you even *think* about abandoning us again,” says Gin darkly, pointing a finger at Kajii threateningly, “I will remove your vocal cords so you can never sing again.”

“Why isn’t anyone asking me what I think?” asks Higuchi haughtily.

“Sounds fair,” says Kajii, looking at Gin and ignoring Higuchi entirely. She bristles in rage but then stops when Kajii places his hands on her shoulders and leans forward to look her directly in the eyes.

“You and me are bandmates now, Princess Maple,” says Kajii solemnly. “But just because I’m your singer now doesn’t mean I can have you fawning over me like you did the Little Gecko. Don’t get me wrong, you’re a hot little number. But it’s for the sake of the band.”

Higuchi screams in outrage and goes back to trying to drown Kajii with more enthusiasm than before. Chuuya laughs before turning to see Gin and Tachihara’s reactions. They aren’t paying attention though.

“Looks like we’re finally getting out of fucking musical quarantine, freak,” says Tachihara brightly, his tone practically bursting with happiness. He’s grinning with almost all his teeth visible.

“Thank god,” says Gin flatly, but her smile is just as big. “If I had to listen to any more of your drum solos I was going to go insane.”

“Shut up,” says Tachihara warmly, shoving her away from him. He turns to face Higuchi and Kajii then. “Hey, Guch, don’t kill our singer. We kind of need him.”

“Fine,” says Higuchi with a sigh, tone full of whining. She lets Kajii come up for air properly this time. She glares at him as he coughs and tries to suck in air.

“The Black Lizards are back, baby!” shouts Kajii once he catches his breath. “This is now a double celebration.” He’s full of violent enthusiasm. “I’m actually surprised Baby Red didn’t try to step in and be the hero and offer to sing.”

“Oh, he did,” says Tachihara, smirking and raising his eyebrows. “I shut him down. Kid just doesn’t have the voice for rock.”

Kajii cackles. “He really doesn’t. Such a talented little songbird, but such a *soft* one.”

Chuuya keeps a calm expression on his face while the others laugh. Then he flings himself at Kajii to dunk him underwater himself.

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### **May, Six Years, Three Months, & Two Weeks Since the Release of Corruption**

Dazai is mulling over his next best course of action as he eats a (fairly large) piece of cake leftover from Atsushi’s birthday a few days ago (he’d feel worse about the size of it if Ranpo

weren't next to him and eating an even bigger one.)

They're sitting at the table in the center of the main office that Kunikida still maintains that they need to keep there until their ongoing conflicts resolve. The rest of the office have pretty much just been using it to eat at and to store random things on. Right now Yosano is sitting at the other end and painting her nails.

"It should be somebody's birthday every week," says Ranpo contently as he eats the last bite of his cake and tosses his empty plate back on the table. If Dazai hadn't been used to him he would have been alarmed at how fast he'd eaten that amount of cake.

"We are allowed to get cake when it's not somebody's birthday," points out Dazai. He pushes the last bits of his own cake around on his plate absentmindedly.

"It tastes better when there's a reason," says Ranpo with a shrug.

For one of the best songwriters Dazai knows, Ranpo has a multitude of these nonsensical beliefs that nobody calls him out on. It's best for everyone when Ranpo is in a good mood. It's extremely awkward when he's upset. He gets very quiet, and it freaks everyone out.

Dazai sighs, not about Ranpo's nonsense, but about having to ask him for advice. "Are you sure you can't just write it?"

"I would have already offered if I thought that would work," says Ranpo as if it were obvious, raising an eyebrow at him. "Sun Tzu does not actually apply to all situations." Ranpo frowns and looks around them. "But don't tell the president I said that."

Dazai sighs again, even more dramatically. He finally finishes off the last of his own cake while pouting. Ranpo rolls his eyes and shows him no sympathy.

Dazai throws his plate on top of Ranpo's in revenge, standing up and putting a big smile on his face as he walks over to Atsushi's desk. Atsushi has a pair of headphones in and jumps when he notices Dazai standing there.

"Sorry," says Atsushi quickly, pulling out one of his earbuds. "Did you want to go back to the music room?"

"Whatcha listening to?" asks Dazai brightly, pulling the headphones out of the computer so his music plays out loud for the whole room.

*You cannot escape gravity,* rings out Chuuya's voice. *It pulls us all down and apart. It rips away-*

The song cuts off abruptly as Atsushi frantically pauses it. His face is possibly redder than Dazai has ever seen it. "Um," he says blankly.

Dazai bursts out in laughter, having to clutch onto Atsushi's desk to steady himself. "Oh, Atsushi," says Dazai in between laughing. "Your face."

“Don’t let Dazai bully you,” says Yosano, coming up to join them and shoving Dazai lightly. She gives him a disapproving look. “I doubt there’s anyone in this room who hasn’t listened to that song a million times. He’s just being an ass about it to rile you up.”

“You never told me you were a fan, Yosano,” says Dazai with a smirk.

Yosano scoffs. “I didn’t want to make you uncomfortable. It’s uncool to shower your new coworker with compliments.” Yosano smirks back at him. “And I’ve been a Chuuya fan since he played with The Sheep.”

“You know who The Sheep are?” asks Dazai in shock, raising both eyebrows.

Yosano laughs. “I’m not that much older than you,” she says shaking her head. “I’m from L.A. Me and my friends used to listen to The Sheep all the time back in high school.”

“Ugh, not me,” says Ranpo loudly from his spot at the table. “I *hated* The Sheep. I couldn’t stand to listen to them.”

“Who are The Sheep?” asks Atsushi, still slightly red in the face but intrigued.

“Pop band,” says Ranpo, voice full of contempt. “Like, the worst kind of pop band.”

“You snob,” accuses Dazai, putting a hand to his chest in mock offense.

“If that isn’t the pot calling the kettle black I don’t know what is,” says Yosano with a snort.

Dazai is about to defend himself when Kunikida opens the door to the office and immediately glares at all of them.

“Is there a reason all of you are lazing about?” asks Kunikida sharply. Tanizaki walks in behind him.

Yosano rolls her eyes but starts walking back towards her office, blowing on her nails as she does. Ranpo completely ignores Kunikida, staying exactly where he is and pulling out his phone. Dazai goes over to his own desk and shuffles papers around to look busy.

Once Kunikida is in conversation with Tanizaki and distracted Dazai leans towards Atsushi.

“Hey, Atsushi,” whispers Dazai conspiratorially. “Let’s ditch.”

Atsushi automatically frowns. “Shouldn’t we be doing vocal training?”

“Creativity dies when it’s confined, Atsushi,” says Dazai passionately but still quietly enough that no one else (i.e. Kunikida) can hear them.

If it had still been March, Atsushi probably would have gone along with whatever Dazai said. Now that they know each other a little better, Atsushi gives him a very skeptical look. Some of it is probably due to Kunikida’s influence. Luckily he’s come around from his initial hesitation to help Atsushi and has shifted to nagging Dazai to stop teaching Atsushi his bad habits.

Kunikida hadn't even faltered when the legal papers were delivered to the office from Francis's lawyer. Dazai doesn't know much about the legal system, and his brief experiences with it through PMR had taught him that the winner is often the one who pays off the jury. But Fukuzawa maintains Francis has no case and that they should spend their time focusing on their music. The only one he discusses it with is Haruno, who spends the majority of her time working with the president.

Atsushi has grown in leaps and bounds vocally since they first started. Dazai wouldn't say he's reached recording shape yet, but it's a near thing. So now they need to shift to actually start working on his single. They need to have a delicate conversation, and Dazai would rather not have it in the middle of all his opinionated coworkers. If he has to scheme a little to make it happen, so be it.

"Fine," says Atsushi, relenting. "Let's go."

"Excellent," chirps Dazai, grabbing Atsushi by the wrist and pulling him towards the door.

"Atsushi and I have important music business elsewhere," calls out Dazai as they leave, a bright smile on his face. "See you later!"

"Dazai, wait-," Dazai hears Kunikida start to say but he doesn't stop and continues leading the way out of the building. Atsushi sighs quietly but doesn't fight against Dazai's hold. He does pull away once they get outside though.

Dazai starts towards his destination, expecting Atsushi to fall in step with him, which he does.

"I have a hard time believing you two write music together," says Atsushi, a perplexed expression on his face.

Dazai laughs lightly. "We don't really write together actually. We mostly steer the other in the right direction."

"It's still hard to picture," says Atsushi while shaking his head.

Dazai hums but doesn't reply, letting them lapse into silence as they walk. Dazai has grown to be somewhat fond of the area of L.A. the ADA is in the past few years. There's a bunch of strange local places that Dazai frequents. He drags Kunikida with him sometimes, or Ranpo if they sell sweets. His favorite is the coffee shop below the ADA, mostly because they let him put whatever he buys on his ever growing tab (which he could technically pay off if he had access to his old PMR bank account, but the chances of him ever getting that are quite slim.) But it is rather far from the beach, which is annoying.

"Where are we going?" asks Atsushi after some time has passed. He sounds curious rather than complaining about them leaving work now.

"We're going to the bus stop," says Dazai matter of factly. They're almost there, and Dazai starts searching his pockets for his bus pass.

Atsushi brings out his own pass, giving Dazai a flat look. "Where are we taking the bus?"

"Where's your sense of adventure?" asks Dazai, pouting at him. "You've only been eighteen a couple days. You should be enjoying your youth."

"Shouldn't you be more serious then since you're older?" asks Atsushi, raising an eyebrow.

Dazai fights off a snort. He really is rubbing off on the kid. It's good to see. A month ago he would have never goaded Dazai like that. It's been a while since an insult has made him this happy.

"I did the whole workaholic thing once upon a time," says Dazai, waving a hand dismissively. "It's overrated."

"Oh," says Atsushi a little sheepishly. "Right."

The bus arrives, and Dazai leads the way to a spot standing near the rear. It's luckily not that packed in the middle of the day. Dazai sometimes seriously regrets never learning to drive when he was younger. He'd never envisioned having to take the bus when he'd decided against it back when he was sixteen. He can appreciate the irony.

It's too loud to talk without raising their voices, and Atsushi is too polite to do that, so they don't talk as they ride away from the inner city. Dazai hums a little under his breath, an old song by Murasaki Shikibu, *The Tale of Genji*. She remains one of the few artists Dazai genuinely enjoys listening to (and yes, Yosano had been totally justified in implying he was a snob, but it was the principle of the matter.)

Eventually they get to a stop a couple blocks from the beach, and Dazai'd rather spend the least amount of time on the bus as possible, so he and Atsushi get off there. Atsushi calls out a thank you as they exit, another reminder that Dazai is putting in all this effort for someone who actually deserves it.

"Are we going to the beach?" asks Atsushi as he once again falls in step with Dazai. He has a small smile on his face.

"We are indeed," says Dazai, smiling back. "I used to not care much for the ocean when I was younger. I thought the sand was uncomfortable and that the salt water stung too much."

"I've always loved the beach," says Atsushi, that love clear in his voice. "It's free, so it was one of the few places the orphanage brought us to. Some of my happiest memories from growing up were there."

"It's one of the best things about L.A.," says Dazai. Memories are something he and Atsushi has in common about the beach. Dazai's are somewhat bittersweet though. But it's possible Atsushi's are too, his descriptions of his time at the orphanage have not painted a pleasant picture of the place. Nick Carraway has earned a spot in Dazai's most hated. If Dazai didn't have so many top tier enemies he'd be up much higher.

"So what made you change your mind?" asks Atsushi, bringing Dazai back to the present.



“Change my mind about what?” asks Dazai. They reach the edge of the sand and Dazai takes off his shoes and socks to carry them. He’s admittedly still not the biggest fan of all the sand.

“About the beach,” clarifies Atsushi, taking off his own shoes. “You said you used to not like it.”

“Ah,” says Dazai, fighting off a frown. That’s not a question he feels like poking at too hard. “Mostly I got over being a precocious snot.”

Atsushi laughs, accepting his explanation. They walk closer to the waves but stick towards where there are only a few people.

Dazai takes off his coat and throws it down on the sand to sit on, patting the ground next to him for Atsushi to sit too. Atsushi doesn’t hesitate to sit in the sand, immediately digging his toes into it.

Dazai wrinkles his nose a bit. It’s probably a normal habit, but the majority of Dazai’s experiences at the beach revolve around one person. Now is not the time to be prodding that particular wound. He isn’t here to watch the waves, although that is something he enjoys doing when he’s stressed. But he came here with a task in mind.

“Someone once told me the ocean is like a form of music,” says Dazai lightly. The words lead to the topic he wants to discuss, but they catch in his throat a little. “That the waves are its own sort of chorus.”

“I like that,” says Atsushi sincerely, looking at the ocean instead of Dazai. He seems content, sitting there.

Dazai’s throat tightens again, even more than before. It’s strange, because on the surface, Atsushi and Chuuya are nothing alike. Chuuya had walked into every situation he’d ever been thrown into with effortless confidence. He was practically fearless, in music and in life.

But the more time Dazai spends with Atsushi, the more Dazai sees the similarities between the two. They both love tea and the ocean. They both actually want to get to *know* Dazai despite how difficult Dazai makes it for them to. But more than anything, it is music where Atsushi reminds him of Chuuya the most.

He’s never met someone who loves music as much as Chuuya. Chuuya had lived and breathed music. He’d played, he’d sang, he’d always have something on in the background. He had a new favorite song practically every day. Dazai had mostly listened to music for work, rarely listening to anything when he was on his own. Chuuya had always been the one to bring music into Dazai’s life, in more ways than one.

Atsushi also deeply loves music. Even when he’s not listening to something, Dazai catches him tapping his fingers or bobbing his head lightly, the music playing in his head instead of out loud. Dazai could hear how much Atsushi loved so many of the songs he’d had him practice with, his adoration bleeding into the notes.

It had made Dazai both excited (because it was hard to fake that kind of energy, and it added so much more to a song) and uneasy (because everything attached to Chuuya has always been a double-edged sword, but lately the edge pointed towards Dazai feels like a rapier while the other is the length of a dagger.)

“You’ve come a long way vocally since we first met,” says Dazai, which is the truth but he’s mostly saying it to put Atsushi in a good mood. “I think you’ll be ready to sing at a professional level sooner rather than later.”

“Really?” asks Atsushi excitedly. He turns to face Dazai with a huge grin. “I couldn’t have done it without your help, Dazai.”

Dazai winces internally. As much as he usually basks in praise thrown his way (or pretends to), he wants Atsushi to be focusing on his own accomplishments, not anyone else’s.

“So I think it’s time to start talking about your debut single,” says Dazai, dropping all the fake cheeriness from his tone. He looks Atsushi directly in the eyes. “I think you should be the one to write it.”

From Atsushi’s facial expression, you would think Dazai had just slapped him, that’s how hard he recoils at Dazai’s words (which Dazai had anticipated, but it’s still hard to witness.) Atsushi opens his mouth but takes a moment to speak.

“I have no idea how to write a song,” says Atsushi when he finally is able to get his words out. They come out rapidly and somewhat frantically. “There’s so many amazing songwriters at the ADA. Why would you want me to be the one to write it?”

“I’ve been working in the music industry for a long time,” says Dazai with a shrug. “I’ve found that singers often deliver their best performances when they’re working on something that, for whatever reason, they connect to. And the easiest way to connect to a song is to be the one to write it.”

“I’m not a songwriter,” says Atsushi softly, still full of doubt.

“You’ve never written a song,” corrects Dazai, smiling a little at him. “If you spend your whole life comparing your music to other people’s, you will always find someone better. It’s much better to focus on what *you* can do.”

“What I can do,” repeats Atsushi, tone contemplative.

“It’s not like you’ll be on your own either,” points out Dazai. “I’ll help you. Ranpo is always willing to critique someone else’s songwriting. And despite his rigid antics, Kunikida can be surprisingly helpful when you’re stuck with a song.” He grins widely at Atsushi. “So, what do you say? Will you give it a try?”

Atsushi swallows and frowns deeply, and Dazai internally worries about him shutting him down, fighting to keep his smile in place.

“I’ll do it,” says Atsushi though, still sounding hesitant. “If you really think that’s what we should do, I’ll do it.”

On the inside, Dazai is throwing up his hands in celebration. Atsushi’s lack of enthusiasm could be changed, but in order to do that Dazai first needed to get him to agree to take a stab at songwriting in the first place. Once they got started he could start nudging him in the right direction.

(Dazai honestly tries to be less manipulative when he tries to get his coworkers at the ADA to do what he wants them to than he’d been at PMR, but it’s just so *useful* sometimes.)

“Although I have no idea where to start,” adds Atsushi with a frown.

“What’s your favorite song?” asks Dazai, tilting his head inquisitively.

Atsushi blinks a little, startled by the question. “*Treasure Island* by Robert Louis Stevenson.”

“What do you like about *Treasure Island*?” asks Dazai. He brings his knees to his chest and rests his head on them. He pointedly does not point out that he thinks *Treasure Island* is fun but ultimately nonsensical trash.

“It’s been my favorite for a long time,” says Atsushi, running a hand in the sand and looking at his fingers instead of Dazai. “I guess I liked the idea of going on a crazy adventure on a pirate ship, it seemed way better than the life I was living.”

“I would never advise you to copy someone else’s style,” says Dazai, turning to face the waves. It settles something inside him, being here. He’s glad he came here today, regardless of how he’d been able to get Atsushi to agree to write a song. “But you can pull inspiration from them. *Treasure Island* is a song that tells a story. So maybe you can write a song that does that.”

“A song that tells a story,” says Atsushi, nodding a little in thought. He’s facing the ocean too. “What’s yours?”

“Huh?” asks Dazai, facing Atsushi again.

“Your favorite song?”

“Oh,” says Dazai lightly. He smiles brightly. “I don’t have one,” he lies, shrugging casually. He’s not going to mention The Sheep again after who one of their members had been was brought up earlier. He also has the feeling Atsushi will ask him why it’s his favorite song, and answering that sounds about as fun as drinking bleach. “I am a snob, but don’t tell Yosano.” Dazai points a warning finger at him.

Atsushi laughs a little and shakes his head. “Sure thing, Dazai.”

“Are you busy?” asks Mori, despite the fact that he hadn’t knocked and is already walking towards Chuuya’s desk.

Chuuya muffles a snort. Of course he’s busy, and of course Mori knows that. And of course they both know he’ll drop anything in order to talk to Mori.

“What’s up?” asks Chuuya, trying to sound upbeat. He gives Mori the most sincere smile he can muster up.

“I’ve decided to pull Kouyou off of Kyouka’s album,” announces Mori, his tone free of emotion. His facial expression is also blank.

Chuuya has to fight off a wince. “If I could just have a little bit more time-.”

“I have given you plenty of time,” says Mori, cutting him off and giving him a cold look. He crosses his arms. “We can’t afford any more delays.” He sighs. “I’d rather not piss off Ozaki, but she’s not leaving me with much choice.”

“Please,” says Chuuya, bowing his head slightly, his hands in fists underneath his desk. He cannot do this to Kouyou, no matter how bad things have gotten between them lately. “I can fix it, I swear. Even just a week.”

Mori stares at him coolly for a long moment, raising an eyebrow. He sighs again, more deeply this time. “One week, not a second more. If anyone else had asked I wouldn’t have even entertained the thought.”

“Thank you, sir,” says Chuuya, quietly letting out a long breath in relief. “I won’t let you down, I swear.”

“It’s not you who I doubt,” says Mori. His expression shifts to a more calculating one. “How is everything else going? Anything to report?”

“As smoothly as can be expected,” says Chuuya, running a hand through his hair. His hat is sitting on the edge of his desk, a visible reminder to keep his head even when he’s struggling. “The Black Lizards are doing well with Kajii rejoining. But it’s hard to say how fast they can put together another album.”

“I was surprised Kajii went back, but it’s worked out in our favor,” says Mori, nodding in approval. “Right now we have to focus on our artists who are closer to release though.”

“How are things going on your end?” asks Chuuya hesitantly. Executive meetings have been put on an indefinite hold, and Chuuya sees Mori even less than he had last month. His fake cheeriness is even less sincere than usual when he does. Mori seems to meet with Ace more frequently than the rest of them, though Chuuya has no idea why. It doesn’t really concern him, so Chuuya doesn’t ask him about it.

“As well as can be expected,” says Mori. He leans back in his chair. “Word around town is that I’ve lost my edge, can’t handle a simple recruitment. Port Mafia Records isn’t even strong enough to stand up to an insignificant independent label.”

Mori delivers the words calmly, but his rage is very apparent. His words make Chuuya just as angry if not angrier.

“That’s fucking bullshit,” declares Chuuya, slamming a hand against his desk.

“It’s rather well done on Francis’s part,” says Mori, smiling violently. “He’s even better at this game than I expected him to be.”

Chuuya takes a deep breath. “Yeah, but he’s a novice compared to you.”

“I could care less about my own reputation,” says Mori, smile getting even bigger. “A leader of an organization is someone who acts as both its king and its servant. They gladly put themselves through all manner of filth and tribulation. But he made a mistake when he decided to challenge Port Mafia Records.”

“I’ll fix the Kyouka thing,” promises Chuuya, now even more determined than before. This isn’t just about Kouyou, this is about PMR. He can’t fail.

“Yes, see that you do,” says Mori lightly, standing up to leave. “I do appreciate all the other work you’ve been doing, Chuuya. It’s been excellent.”

“Thank you, Boss,” says Chuuya sincerely. He’s not even sure if Mori’s complimenting him to manipulate him or not.

“I’ll check back in with you next week then,” says Mori as he leaves. He doesn’t look back or wait for a response from Chuuya.

Chuuya moves to leave as well, grabbing his hat and plopping it on his head. He’d gotten the time he’d asked for. Now he has to make it worth it.

He finds Kyouka in one of PMR’s practice rooms with Hirotsu. Kouyou is nowhere in sight, which is a stroke of good luck. Kyouka is standing by a microphone while Hirotsu sits in a chair nearby and takes notes. For a second Chuuya gets a sense of déjà vu, he’d been in Kyouka’s place in a room like this with Hirotsu once upon a time.

Normally when Chuuya walks into a practice room someone is playing music. But it’s silent as he makes his way into the room.

“Chuuya,” says Hirotsu when he notices him. His voice is neutral, but Chuuya knows him well enough to hear he’s glad to see him and also frustrated. “Are you here to assist us?”

“Actually, I’m here to talk to Kyouka,” says Chuuya, giving the small girl a friendly smile. “I’ll be out of your hair soon.”

“Very well,” says Hirotsu, going back to his notes and giving them some relative privacy. He always has been an extremely perceptive old man.

Kyouka Izumi looks up at him with blank eyes. “What did you want to talk about?”

Kyouka is perhaps the most serious fourteen year old he’s ever met. Her facial expression rarely shifts, in either happiness or sadness. Her face stays the same when she sings too. Her voice is amazing, but looking at her you’d think she was some kind of musical robot.

She’s short (although he’s barely taller, but that’s neither here nor there). Kyouka tends to wear traditional Japanese kimonos rather than Western style clothes. Chuuya knows that she had lived in Japan for most of her life then moved to the States a couple years ago. She almost always wears her long hair in pigtails, her hair color so black it looks almost blue. Today her hair ties have little white flowers on them.

On the outside, she looks like your average teenage girl. But Chuuya had never met a teenage girl who’d made him feel as unsettled with their flat eyed stares before.

Chuuya really hasn’t gotten the chance to talk to her one on one much. He’d dropped in on tea with her and Kouyou back when she’d first signed with PMR, but even then she’d been practically silent. He and Kouyou had done most of the talking. He’d always tried his best to be nice to her, but she’d been borderline cold and polite back.

He’s been approaching Kyouka’s album by trying to convince Kouyou to change her mind, but he doesn’t have the time to tiptoe around her feelings anymore. Now he’s going to go straight to the source.

Luckily, he has a lot of experience with seemingly emotionless people to draw on (perhaps one of the only benefits of being so attached to all those memories.)

“Are you free tonight?” asks Chuuya, keeping his tone somewhere between casual and business-like. “There’s a work thing I’d like you to come to.”

Kyouka’s one eyebrow raises slightly, but she doesn’t question him. “I’m not busy tonight.”

“Great,” says Chuuya, walking away before she has a chance to change her mind or ask more questions. “I’ll pick you up around seven. See you then.” He turns to call out to Hirotsu, “Later, geezer.”

Hirotsu rolls his eyes but smiles and waves. Kyouka watches him go with the slightest hint of a frown.

Chuuya starts walking back to his office, pulling out his phone to send out a text as he does.

**[9:13am Chuuya]: What are you doing tonight?”**

He gets a reply almost immediately, which makes him frown because she’s *supposed* to be in class right now.

**[9:13am ☆ Elise ☆ ]: omg please tell me we’re doing something!!! i haven’t seen you in FOREVER**

Chuuya knocks on the door of Kyouka's dorm a couple minutes before seven. It's on the second floor of the PMR dorm building, not too far from his old dorm. Chuuya fights off the sting of the nostalgia as Kyouka opens the door.

She hasn't changed from earlier, in clothes or expression. Kyouka nods in greeting and joins him in the hall, locking her door behind her. Chuuya isn't sure if she'd always been polite or if Kouyou had drilled it into her. Kouyou had tried with him, but he'd already been a lost cause by the time he'd met her.

Kyouka doesn't comment on his own outfit of dark jeans and a plain grey sweatshirt, his usual choker and hat left in his apartment. He's pulled his hair into a loose ponytail. Chuuya hasn't gone out in something this casual since April when he'd literally been dragged into his birthday celebration.

It is very clear Chuuya is not dressed for a work event. But, well, he'd picked up a couple things from others over the years. A tiny bit of manipulation could sometimes be justified.

"Let's get going," says Chuuya lightly, smiling at Kyouka and leading the way towards the exit. She falls in step beside him, her sandals flopping against the floor.

The dorm building is only a couple doors down from the office, and Chuuya heads towards the PMR parking lot. He brings out a set of keys (that don't exactly belong to him, but old habits die hard), and presses the unlock button to find which van he's borrowing (he's an executive now, who the fuck is going to complain anyway?).

If Kyouka thinks it's strange they're taking a random PMR van in the evening, or that any of Chuuya's behavior is odd, she doesn't voice it. Hopefully by the end of the night Chuuya will be able to coax *something* out of her.

Chuuya flicks on the radio as he drives out of the parking lot and towards their first destination of the evening. Kyouka looks out the window, watching the city as they drive. Chuuya taps his hand on the steering wheel along to *The Sound and the Fury* as he drives, he's always liked Faulkner.

The houses around them get progressively nicer as they get closer to the entrance to Elise's extremely expensive (and frankly pretentious) private school. She's already waiting out front when they pull up, scrolling on her phone. Her face lights up as she realizes who's driving the van parking next to her.

Elise doesn't hesitate to open the door of the van and jump into the backseat. Her smile is huge as she leans over the driver's seat to give Chuuya a quick hug, which is not easy for how she has to twist her body to accomplish it. Her long blonde ponytail ends up shoved into Chuuya's face but he's too excited to see her to complain.

“You have got to stop stealing PMR’s vans some day,” says Elise as a greeting, pulling back and shoving Chuuya’s shoulder lightly. “You have your own car.”

Chuuya does, it had been yet another extravagant birthday present from Kouyou from when he’d turned twenty one. She’d gotten him a signed copy of *Poèmes saturniens* this year, calling a one day truce in their ongoing feud.

“What?” asks Chuuya with a smirk. “You going to tell Mori on me?”

Elise rolls her eyes and moves to the backseat again. “Hi Kyouka,” she says lightly.

“Hi Elise,” says Kyouka, tone a little less put together than usual. She’s giving Chuuya a somewhat bewildered look, as if he’s hit her quota for weird before she can’t fight off a reaction.

Elise had not been thrilled when he’d called her and told her his plans for the evening earlier and who was going to be coming with them.

“Kyouka Izumi?” she’d whined. “Why? She hates me.”

“What?” Chuuya had asked in disbelief. “I highly doubt that.”

Elise had sighed heavily. “Chuuya, I was *ecstatic* to finally have a girl somewhat close to my age at PMR to hang out with when I’m stuck at the office. I literally tried embarrassingly hard to befriend her. She shut me down so hard. I don’t know why, but she hates me.”

“She’s just shy,” Chuuya had said. Kyouka had never seemed to genuinely dislike the people around her. Not from Chuuya’s observations anyway.

“That’s just what people think when a teenage girl ignores someone,” Elise had said, pout clear in her voice. “Do you know how many people I don’t like think *I’m* shy?”

Chuuya had laughed a little, because Elise is probably the furthest thing from shy there is. Then he’d changed to a more serious voice. “Could you try one more time? I’d really appreciate it.”

“Ugh, you’re lucky I love you,” Elise had said. But she hadn’t raised any more protests. She’d jumped straight back into being excited.

She keeps up a constant stream of chatter as they drive to their second destination, mostly about school and her friends there. Chuuya listens and chimes in now and again. Kyouka looks back and forth between them, not adding anything but clearly paying attention.

Chuuya eventually parks the van not too far from the bar and restaurant Chuuya had picked out after some internet searching and prior experience. Not that he’d ever been to the place he’d chosen before, but he’d spent a lot of time in this neighborhood back when he’d played with The Sheep. It’s a decent area, not fancy but not shabby. It’s the perfect kind of place to go to have a good time without being bombarded with people.



Chuuya leads the way towards the door of the place, Elise and Kyouka following behind him. He opens the door for them when he reaches it, the sign on the door advertising **Wednesday Karaoke Nights!**

Elise walks in first, going right up to the hostess to ask for a table for three. Kyouka's eyebrows are slightly furrowed as she follows her. Chuuya smiles widely at her.

Someone is already on stage, singing an enthusiastic if not on key version of *The Grapes of Wrath* (which Chuuya *used* to like before he'd sworn off all music by those stupid Guild motherfuckers). Chuuya follows the hostess to a table somewhat near the stage, taking a seat on one of the benches and stretching out enough so Elise and Kyouka have to share the other one. Kyouka takes the inner seat while Elise sits on the end.

"Can I get you anything to drink?" asks their hostess as she gives them some menus.

"A water is good for me, thanks," says Chuuya. He starts flipping through the menu so that she won't pay attention to him. He usually doesn't mind getting recognized, he usually expects it actually, but it's not how he wants to start tonight.

"Same for me," says Elise.

"I'll have one as well," says Kyouka.

"Sounds good," says the hostess. "Your waitress will bring those with her."

Chuuya lowers his menu as she walks away.

"You're a master of disguise," says Elise sarcastically.

"Shut up," says Chuuya, rolling his eyes. "If you're hungry you can get something."

"I didn't think we came here to eat," says Elise, smirking a little.

Chuuya gives her a flat look. "How perceptive of you. Mori would be so proud."

"Are we here to sing?" asks Kyouka, surprising Chuuya by speaking up. Her tone is still fairly flat. But there is the slightest spark of interest in her eyes.

"I have an assignment for you," says Chuuya, looking at Kyouka and leaning forward on the table with his elbows. "I've heard you in the studio, now I want to hear you out in the wild."

"What did you want me to sing?" asks Kyouka, accepting his strange task without missing a beat.

"That's for you two to decide," says Chuuya lightly.

Both girls turn to look at each other for a second before turning back to face Chuuya.

"For us two to decide?" asks Elise mildly, but her eyes are clearly saying *you did not mention this*.

“Yup,” says Chuuya, smiling widely. “You two are going to do a duet. Take as much time as you want picking your song.”

He leans back against the bench and crosses his arms. Kyouka is biting her lip lightly, looking at Elise out of the corner of her eye.

Elise takes a deep breath then turns to Kyouka with a fake smile (Mori would actually probably be proud of that). “So, what kind of music do you like?”

“I’m not picky,” says Kyouka, but there’s just a hint more emotion to her tone than usual, possibly nerves.

“Oh, come on,” says Elise encouragingly. “You’re a musician. You’ve got to have *some* sort of opinion.”

Kyouka blinks and swallows. “We could do *Golden Demon*.”

She looks towards Chuuya to gauge his reaction, but he keeps his expression free of judgement. Kyouka turns back towards Elise then.

“I love that song,” says Elise, more sincere now than before.

“Perfect,” says Chuuya with a nod. “Go sign up.”

Elise gives him another look that says *I do not take order from you, Chuuya Nakahara*. But she puts another smile on her face and walks towards the stage where the person with the clipboard is signing people up.

“I didn’t warm up at all,” says Kyouka, the tiniest hint of a frown visible.

Chuuya can’t hold back a sigh. “That’s fine, Kyouka. Just have fun up there with it.”

Kyouka’s frown grows slightly more pronounced, but Elise gets back to the table and beckons a finger towards Kyouka.

“We’re in luck,” she says, leaning against the table. “Nobody else in line. Let’s do this thing, Kyouka.”

“Right,” says Kyouka, getting up to follow Elise to the stage. She looks tiny compared to Elise as they walk, Elise could probably rest her elbow on Kyouka’s head.

Elise grins at the room as she walks onto to stage, no nerves at all. She grabs one of the microphones and hands the other to Kyouka, who is standing slightly behind her.

“Hey, everyone,” says Elise into the microphone, tone light and airy. “My name’s Elise and this is Kyouka. We’re going to sing *Golden Demon* for you.”

Kyouka doesn’t add anything, and Elise signals for someone to start the music. The beginning of the song is familiar to Chuuya after hearing it so many times, he can’t help but smile.

*“Congratulations on your engagement,”* sings Elise, taking the lead. *“Everyone says that it’s a smart match.”*

Chuuya remembers Elise expressing her fears about not having any musical talent a few years back, practically almost crying about it. But she doesn’t hesitate to sing in front of this small crowd of people, despite the fact that she really is not a great singer. She’s not *bad*, but when you work in the music industry you’re used to hearing people who know what they’re doing. Compared to the music Chuuya usually listens to, Elise is honestly mediocre.

But she clearly doesn’t care, singing the lyrics with heart and swaying a little to the music.

*“You’ve traded your heart for quite a sum,”* sings Kyouka, her voice drastically different than Elise’s. It’s clear and powerful, the notes coming out almost flawlessly. There’s a couple cheers from around the restaurant. *“I hope you’re satisfied with your catch.”*

Elise gives Kyouka a huge smile, not bothered at all by their difference in skill.

And then it fucking happens, Kyouka smiles back. Not a big one, but her lips turn up just *slightly* at the corners, and Chuuya doesn’t remember the last time he’d felt this victorious.

His own smile is humongous. He lets out a loud cheer from his spot at the bench, getting a couple of disapproving looks from the people around him. Chuuya completely ignores them.

*I thought it was love, but it was all lies*

*But a heart can’t regenerate once it dies*

*So you’ve got your money and I’ve got my freedom*

*Never thought I would be victim to a golden demon*

They sing the chorus together, Elise bopping along the stage happily. Kyouka starts to move a bit to the music too. And it really shouldn’t work, their voices are not a good match, and they don’t hit a single harmony. But they make it work just by clearly enjoying themselves.

By the time the second verse starts, Kyouka’s smile is big enough that the whole restaurant can see it. Chuuya leans back in his seat, satisfied and proud. He listens to the rest of the song the same way. Once they finish he leads the applause.

Elise grabs Kyouka’s hand and forces her into a bow with her, and Kyouka doesn’t resist her. Elise doesn’t let go once they stand up. She thanks the crowd and tugs Kyouka along back to their bench where Chuuya is waiting.

*“Well, Executive Nakahara,”* says Elise as she sits down on the inner seat this time. She’s the slightest bit breathless. *“How did we do?”*

“I was thoroughly impressed,” says Chuuya, passing her one of the waters that had arrived while they were singing. He gives Kyouka one as well, smiling at her. “You did a great job.”

“Thank you,” says Kyouka, surprising him by speaking up first. There’s a flush to her face, and she takes a long sip of water.

“I was terrible,” says Elise with a laugh. She turns to face Kyouka. “But you, you’re *good*.”

Kyouka shrugs and takes another drink of her water.

“No, seriously,” says Elise. She drops all joking from her voice. “I’ve listened to a lot of music in my life, more than I really wanted to. You’re amazing.”

“Thank you,” says Kyouka again, clearly a little flustered by all the praise.

“Oh wow,” says Elise. “You *are* shy. I thought you were just a bitch.”

Chuuya’s jaw drops and he’s about to tell her off, but then Kyouka *laughs*. She’s the happiest Chuuya has ever seen her since he’d met her. Even though that had been Chuuya’s goal, it makes him insanely glad.

“Now,” says Elise, leaning towards Kyouka and whispering loudly, “What do you think we should do to get Chuuya to sing?”

“I’m not singing,” says Chuuya flatly. He gives Elise an unimpressed look.

“It’s been so long since I’ve heard you sing,” says Elise, pouting at him. “Do it for me and Kyouka.” She gives the other girl a nudge.

“It’s not fair if we had to sing but you don’t,” says Kyouka, challenge clear in her voice. Elise looks delighted, holding up her hand for a high five. Kyouka returns it.

“Fine,” says Chuuya, rolling his eyes. His smile gives away how he’s not annoyed at all though. “Kyouka, what’s your favorite song?”

“Oh,” says Kyouka, tapping her hand on the table awkwardly. “I’m not sure.”

Chuuya decides not to push her on it. She’s already given so much tonight. He turns to Elise instead. “What’s *your* favorite song?”

“*Corruption*,” says Elise with a smirk. The worst part is that she’s telling the truth.

“Suck up,” accuses Chuuya anyway, pointing a finger at her. “Second favorite?”

Elise’s smirk grows even wider. “*Twilight*. Stephanie Meyer.”

Chuuya rolls his eyes. “We will discuss that later,” he promises her. But he moves to get up, smirking a little himself as he walks towards the unoccupied stage.

The man signing people up for karaoke stares at him as he approaches. “You’re Chuuya Nakahara,” he says, awe clear in his voice.

“No, I’m not,” says Chuuya flippantly, smiling widely at him.

“Um, okay,” says the man, clearly not believing him but not knowing whether he should argue. “Did you want to do a song?”

“You guys have *Twilight*?” asks Chuuya, smiling lightly.

To the man’s credit, he does not bat an eye at his song choice. “Sure do,” he says with a nod. “You’re up.”

Chuuya nods in thanks and walks onto the stage. Despite the size and the setting, a small thrill goes through him as he walks up to the microphone. It’s been a *long* time since he’s played for a crowd. Chuuya can’t even remember when the last time had been, maybe back with Kouyou when they’d done the *Golden Demon* anniversary duet. But they’d basically only performed for a couple interviews, never for a real audience.

This group of people might be minuscule compared to the numbers he’s played for, but Chuuya started out playing in people’s basements and garages. He’s never cared how many people there are. He loves to sing whatever the circumstances.

It’s strange to resist slipping into his stage persona. He has to bite back a *Hello, Los Angeles*. Chuuya doesn’t fight the huge grin from coming out though.

“Hey, everybody,” says Chuuya into the mic, the equipment hilariously low quality compared to what he’s used to. He hears whispers of his name around him, but he ignores them. “This song goes out to the two brats I came here with. Here’s *Twilight*.”

The song opens with a slow piano playing. Chuuya snorts a little and shakes his head. But he’s never half-assed a performance, and he’s not about to start now. He sings the ridiculous lyrics with everything he’s got.

*Seventeen and nobody special*

*Moved up north to get away*

*Didn’t know it would lead to something existential*

*How fast I fell for you is a cliché*

The restaurant cheers him on as he moves around the stage, raising a hand to his heart dramatically. It makes Chuuya go even harder on the chorus.

*Twilight, the end of the day, the return of the night*

*But without the dark we'd never see the stars*

*I know that I want to be with you forever*

*I don't care what people say, this love is ours*

Chuuya twirls around the tiny stage, the restaurant hoots and hollers for him. He eats it up, feeling more alive singing this ridiculous song that he has in ages. He's never given a shit if the music he plays is the best or most intricate, some of the best times of his life had been playing absolute shit with The Sheep.

Chuuya jumps off the stage as the next verse starts, serenading this random restaurant in Los Angeles with a song he barely knows, having the absolute time of his life.

He's still in a good mood when they drop off Elise later. She'd kept bursting out in laughter after Chuuya finished his song, saying she couldn't stop picturing it. He'd stuck his tongue out at her and rolled his eyes.

"Thanks for tonight," says Elise as they pull up to her school. She leans forward to give Chuuya another hug. He returns it the best that he can with their awkward positioning. "I had a great time."

"Thanks for coming," says Chuuya quietly. Then he uses a normal volume. "And don't blame me if you get caught texting in class."

"Yeah, yeah," says Elise dismissively. She surprises Chuuya by reaching over to hug Kyouka too.

Kyouka is equally surprised, an awkward expression on her face as she hesitantly pats Elise on the back.

"See you, Kyouka," says Elise brightly as she pulls away. "I'll text you."

She flashes them one more huge grin before getting out of the van. Elise walks towards her school, raising a hand in goodbye as she goes.

Chuuya snorts a little and turns to Kyouka. "You hungry? There's a good crepes place on the way back."

(Chuuya knows crepes are Kyouka's favorite food. Chuuya has had to schmooze a million industry people for his job, he knows what he's doing.)

"That sounds nice," says Kyouka, a little more subdued than earlier but leagues better than this morning.

"Cool," says Chuuya, tone casual. He turns up the radio again, letting the music play. He's surprisingly content for how terribly his day had started. He's been so caught up in everything with PMR. He'd planned this in order to give Kyouka a break, but it might have been even better for himself than it'd been for her.

Chuuya is just starting to think he's going to have to come up with a way to start the conversation again when Kyouka speaks up.

"Why did you ask me to come tonight?" asks Kyouka. The question is more curious than anything.

"I usually know the artists who I work with on albums fairly well," says Chuuya. He glances at her before looking back towards the road. "Some better than others of course. I think it's easier to make music with people once you understand them a little, if you know their style. But it's been practically two months, and I still feel like I don't know you very well."

"Plus I thought this would be fun," adds Chuuya, giving Kyouka a quick grin.

"It was," says Kyouka. She hesitates before her next words. "What do you want to know?"

"This isn't an interrogation," says Chuuya gently. "You don't have to tell me anything you don't want to."

Kyouka hums in agreement but doesn't say anything else. She's staring at her hands.

"How old were you when you started singing?" asks Chuuya, starting with something hopefully simple. "You're way beyond most people your age."

"I would have thought Kouyou would have told you these things," says Kyouka, voice back to its blank and emotionless version.

"I've known Kouyou a long time," says Chuuya, smiling despite how sour their relationship has been recently. "One of my favorite things about her is that if you tell her something, she never tells anyone else."

"Oh," says Kyouka, a little surprised. She clears her throat. "My mom loved music."

Chuuya instantly picks up on the word *loved*. He had not been expecting that. It also hits a little close to home with his own past.

"Oh," he says carefully. "I seriously didn't mean to pry. If you're only telling me because I'm your boss or whatever it's really not necessary. You can tell me to fuck off."

"Kouyou has mentioned you have a swearing problem," says Kyouka.

Chuuya snorts. “She’s not wrong. Here, let’s get some crepes.”

They pull up to the small creperie Chuuya had found online (after learning what the fuck a creperie even was). Chuuya has no idea what to order, so he just copies Kyouka, who fires off her order with ease. He ends up with something that looks too sweet for his own tastes with tons of fruit and whipped cream. They decide to eat them in the van instead of staying in the tiny restaurant.

Chuuya picks at his food once they’re back in the van, wondering if he can give Kyouka the rest of his after she finishes hers. He’d been right, it’s disgustingly sweet. But Kyouka is happily nibbling on her own.

Chuuya has been trying to fight off the association, but it’s strange how much a fourteen year old girl reminds him of Dazai. Liking sweets is just one of the little things. It has way more to do with their personalities. They both go to extremes to hide how they really feel, Dazai with fake cheerfulness and Kyouka with blankness. Yet just like Dazai, Chuuya can tell that deep down Kyouka feels a lot more than she lets on.

Instead of making him colder to Kyouka, it’s endeared Chuuya to her even more. Dazai’s acts had always put him off, and Chuuya had always wanted to make him realize he didn’t need any of that bullshit. He’d thought he’d been making progress until everything had gotten fucked up.

But with Kyouka, he has another chance to possibly get it right. He’s under no delusions that he can “fix” her or whatever, it’s not like she needs to be fixed. But if he can be someone she can be a little more honest with, if he can show her there are people who will accept her if she doesn’t hide what she’s thinking, Chuuya would consider that even more important than her putting out a bestselling album.

“You don’t like it, do you?” asks Kyouka. She’s nearly halfway done with her own crepe while Chuuya’s only taken a couple bites of his.

“I don’t,” admits Chuuya, smiling and shaking his head. “You can have mine if you want. I only brought you here because I heard you like crepes.”

“You’re different than I thought you would be,” says Kyouka. Her tone makes it hard to tell if that’s a good thing or not. “I would like your crepe.”

Chuuya looks at her, wondering what else he can ask her while respecting her privacy. The first question that comes to mind makes him have to try not to laugh.

“Okay, I have to know,” says Chuuya, smiling and raising his eyebrows at her. “What the hell did Ryuunosuke Akutagawa say to you to get you to sign with PMR? I’ve asked him a million times, but he’ll never fess up.”

“He wasn’t very kind,” says Kyouka, frowning a little. “But he was very honest.”

“Honest about what?” asks Chuuya.



“Ryuunosuke told me how before he worked for Port Mafia Records he and his sister were squatting in an abandoned apartment in one of the run down areas of L.A,” says Kyouka, turning to face Chuuya with a serious expression. “He told me that they used to play music in the city to earn money for the things they needed. He said that Port Mafia Records saved his life, and that it could do the same for me.”

“Oh,” says Chuuya dumbly for the second time this evening. His stomach drops, feeling a pang of hurt for the younger Akutagawas. He’d been aware of their situation, but he’s rarely heard either of them mention it so explicitly. Akutagawa’s reluctance to spill what he’d said to recruit Kyouka makes a lot more sense now. Although he can’t help but wonder how the fuck he had screwed up the exact same assignment with Atsushi Nakajima then.

“I’d heard a lot of bad things about the company,” says Kyouka, shrugging, “But I figured a place that could do that couldn’t be all bad.”

“I’m not going to bullshit you and say it’s a perfect place,” says Chuuya. He hands her his barely eaten crepe as she finishes off hers. “And PMR didn’t rescue me exactly, but they’ve been like family to me ever since I was fifteen. All of the negative shit doesn’t compare to everything I’ve gained.”

“My mom didn’t want me to be a singer,” says Kyouka lowly. Chuuya thinks he didn’t hear her right for a second.

“Why not?” asks Chuuya, voice as kind as he can make it. He’s surprised Kyouka is bringing her up again when she’d seemed so reluctant to talk about her earlier.

“My mom loved music, she used to say it was the greatest form of storytelling,” says Kyouka. Her hands are a little less steady as they bring the crepe up to her mouth. “But she felt that it was more important to get an education. She didn’t want me to limit myself by pursuing music at a young age.”

Chuuya doesn’t really know how to reply to that, but luckily Kyouka keeps talking.

“My father died when I was very young due to lung cancer,” says Kyouka. She stops trying to eat the crepe, but she continues to look at it instead of Chuuya. “I don’t remember him very well. Then my mother passed away due to breast cancer two years ago, and I came to live with my uncle in Los Angeles.”

“God, Kyouka, that’s terrible,” says Chuuya quietly. “I’m sorry for your losses.”

“Thank you,” says Kyouka, voice equally quiet. Then she speaks at a normal volume again. “My uncle is not a bad person, but he did not want a child. I was a burden to him. He saw my singing as potentially useful. He pushed me to sign with Port Mafia Records.”

“So,” says Chuuya, things falling into place after months of having the puzzle pieces put together in the wrong way. “You don’t actually want to do an album. That’s why you’re dragging your feet.”

“It’s not that I don’t want to,” says Kyouka, voice slightly sharp. She looks up at Chuuya, her eyes full of emotion for once. “But when I sing...it makes me think of my mom. Whether she’d be proud of my choices. And...it makes me miss her.”

Chuuya considers that, biting his lip and letting out a small sigh. The similarities between their backgrounds are chipping away at a wall that Chuuya had constructed to push away those memories. But it feels like cowardice to avoid sharing his own story when it could possibly help Kyouka in some way.

“My mother was also the one who got me into music,” says Chuuya. He can’t even think of the last time he’d even said the words *my mother*. “She had a lot of issues, issues that made it difficult for her to be a parent.” He forces the words out, brushing over the nastier details. “She died when I was seven. I don’t miss her when I play music, but sometimes it does make me think of her.”

Chuuya glances at Kyouka to see her looking at him with wide eyes. He takes a deep breath and keeps going.

“It’s true that music can be painful,” says Chuuya, thinking of all those nights he’d woken up from nightmares. “There have been times in my life where I thought I would rather live in silence than face the feelings that music brought out. But I was never truly happier when I ran away from music. It’s a part of me, even the uglier parts.”

“But music has sometimes been the only thing in my life that has kept me going,” continues Chuuya, smiling despite all the terrible memories he’s dredging up. “I’ll be so lost, and then I’ll hear a song that just perfectly echos exactly how I’m feeling. It makes me feel connected, less alone, even if they aren’t facing the exact problems I am.”

“I can’t tell you whether your mom was right or not,” says Chuuya, shrugging slightly. “Being a musician isn’t easy. But it’s up to you to choose what *you* want, not your mom, and not Kouyou either.”

Kyouka looks troubled by the mention of Kouyou. “I know you two are fighting about it,” she says, not making eye contact again. “About me.”

“And that’s on us, not you,” says Chuuya pointedly. “Don’t worry about that.” He crosses his arms. “Look, I’m not going to tell you what to do. I don’t regret my decision to release music at a young age at all, but I know that there are others who do.”

“However,” adds Chuuya, giving her a determined look, “I think you’ll have an easier time figuring it out if you actually try.”

“I have been trying,” says Kyouka, an edge of stubbornness to her voice.

“Look me in the eyes and say that,” says Chuuya flatly. When she doesn’t he sighs. “I’m not impartial because I *do* want you to make an album, and I think you could make something phenomenal. But I can’t force you to do it.”

Kyouka takes another bite of crepe instead of answering.

“Just think about it,” requests Chuuya, turning on the van instead of waiting for a reply.

He starts driving back towards PMR. He feels a little wrung out, he hadn’t anticipated this when he’d set out to get to the bottom of the Kyouka issue this morning. His mom has been in his thoughts as she always is this time of year, but he’d been avoiding them rather than leaning into them up until now.

Almost sixteen years to the day she died, yet he hasn’t managed to detach from her or her words entirely. His doubts about his humanity still linger in the back of his head, where he tries to keep them. They don’t consume him like they had when he was younger, but once in a while he’ll find himself sitting in front of the nearest body of water instead of sleeping, the words of *Arahabaki* too loud to drown out.

Still, he’d meant what he’d said to Kyouka. The things music had given him far surpassed any pain it had brought. He doesn’t regret any of it, not even *Corruption*. He still avoids the song and everything to do with it as much as possible, but he wouldn’t erase the song from his life if that meant having to give up those moments on stage with Dazai when he’d settled a hand against him to cut off his solo, his brown eyes always filled with an understanding they’d never spoken aloud.

Kyouka keeps eating while they drive, and this time Chuuya isn’t interested in getting her to talk more. He’s thrown pretty much everything he has on the line. If it doesn’t work, Mori will do what he has to do. Chuuya truly wants Kyouka to give music a chance, but if she doesn’t there’s nothing more he can do.

“I’d always been intimidated by Elise,” says Kyouka after a couple minutes of silence, surprising Chuuya. “I thought she was just being nice to me because someone told her to be. I didn’t think she actually wanted to be friends.”

Chuuya laughs a little. “Elise is one of my favorite people in the world. It wasn’t easy for her, growing up with the CEO of PMR as her guardian. She didn’t have a lot of opportunities to make friends with people her own age. I can assure you no one told her to be nice to you.”

“I know that now,” says Kyouka, just a touch haughtily. Then she softens. “It was nice of you to invite her tonight.”

“It can’t be easy having no one your own age around PMR,” says Chuuya. He’d always had Dazai, but he remembers how miserable Elise used to be. “I thought you two would get along.”

Kyouka hums and nods. Chuuya pulls the van back into the parking lot where he’d found it, adjusting the seat so it was how it had been earlier.

Chuuya leads the way back towards the dorm building. It’s not that late, but he’s kind of exhausted. He’s not sure if he’d been successful from a work perspective tonight, but he feels he at least accomplished something personally. He walks Kyouka to her door in mutual silence. She looks like she’s deep in thought, which he hopes is a good sign.

“*Aoto Zōshi Hana no Nishiki-e*,” says Kyouka when they reach her door. “That’s my favorite song. By Kawatake Mokuami. I just didn’t think they’d have Japanese music.”

“That’s an old one,” says Chuuya, surprised both by her choice and her sharing it. “Long too.” He gives her a big smile. “You have good taste.”

“I like *Twilight* too,” says Kyouka, the words coming out a little guiltily. “But don’t tell Kouyou.”

Chuuya laughs loudly. “Your secret is safe with me, Kyouka.”

Kyouka gives him a shy smile back. “Good night.”

“Night,” says Chuuya warmly.

“What did you say to Kyouka yesterday?” are the first words out of Kouyou’s mouth when she walks into his office the next afternoon. The words are part accusation and part demand. She’s giving Chuuya an icy stare as she stalks towards his desk.

“Excuse me?” asks Chuuya in a neutral tone. He crosses his arms and meets her gaze steadily, not intimidated at all by her anger.

“What did you say to her?” Kouyou repeats the question, tone even more irritated. “Because suddenly this morning she’s like a completely different person. She’s settled on two potential songs for the album when up to this point she hasn’t liked any.”

It’s a mistake that Chuuya smiles over the news. Kouyou’s expression goes from angry to absolutely livid.

“She’s only *fourteen*,” says Kouyou. She’s almost raising her voice, practically unheard of behavior from her. “And you and Mori are manipulating her for your own purposes.”

“What the fuck do you think I said to her?” demands Chuuya angrily. He stands up and shoves his chair behind him. He tries not to swear in front of Kouyou, let alone swear *at* her. But this is the last fucking straw. “Seriously, what the hell do you think I did? Do you think that I would lie or try to intimidate her?” Chuuya throws out his arms in outrage. “Do you not know me at all?”

“I know how dedicated you are to this company,” says Kouyou coldly, the words hitting Chuuya like a slap in the face.

His hands are trembling slightly. He and Kouyou have had their share of arguments over the years, but Chuuya has never been this furious with her before. The insinuation that he would try and force Kyouka into making an effort with her album through cruelty or lies makes Chuuya feel like Kouyou had just broken something between them.

“Every single time someone has *ever* said anything bad about you, I have stuck up for you,” says Chuuya, somehow saying the words at a normal volume instead of yelling. Usually he screams and shouts when he’s angry, but right now his words are coming out like cold steel. “Every single time. No matter who it was.” He smiles without any joy. “Even Mori. Every single time he asked why Kyouka wasn’t making any progress, I lied. I didn’t bring your name up once. And when he asked me about you, I stood up for you *every single time*.”

Kouyou opens her mouth to speak but Chuuya cuts her off before she can. “But I don’t know why I bother. You clearly have a very low opinion of me if you think I would do something to hurt Kyouka in order to get an album out of her. Get out of my office.”

“Chuuya,” says Kouyou, looking taken aback, her rage transforming into shock and possibly hurt. “I-.”

“Get out of my office,” repeats Chuuya a little louder, emphasizing each word.

Kouyou blinks in response. Her face goes through a complex series of emotions as she turns to leave. Chuuya refuses to let his eyes water until she walks out the door.

She doesn’t make it to the door though. Kouyou stops when she gets halfway there and turns around.

“When Dazai left PMR,” says Kouyou, words just the slightest hint unsteady, “Mori asked me if we should drop you too. He was worried you might try to follow Dazai. I told him letting you go would be the biggest mistake he ever made. I still feel that way.”

Now Chuuya is the one too surprised to respond. He had no idea that had happened. He can’t even really fault Mori for worrying about that, if Dazai had asked... Well, he hadn’t, so it didn’t matter ultimately. Besides, he knows he’s earned Mori’s trust now.

But perhaps Chuuya had been too quick to think something had broken between him and Kouyou.

“I told Kyouka that even though music can be painful sometimes, it can also help you,” says Chuuya, voice losing his earlier calmness. “I told her that I also have trouble with memories of my mother and music, but that avoiding music had never made those problems go away.”

Kouyou starts walking back towards his desk slowly. “She told you about her parents?”

“I didn’t force her to,” says Chuuya, looking down at his desk instead of at her.

“I didn’t think you had,” says Kouyou, tone uncharacteristically gentle. “I’m just surprised. She didn’t tell me about them until we’d known each other a couple months. You have always been eerily good with people.”

“Not with the people who matter the most to me apparently,” Chuuya can’t help but say, looking up but to the side of her.

“I apologize,” says Kouyou, and that’s enough to make Chuuya look her in the eyes. Kouyou does not apologize lightly. She’s frowning at Chuuya. “I’m afraid I’ve let my worry for Kyouka make me unreasonable. I know you’d never do anything to hurt her or anyone else. I admit I’m also a little strung out after these past couple months of endless negotiations.”

“I accept your apology,” says Chuuya sincerely, smiling slightly. “I also haven’t been my best self lately, especially to you. Kyouka’s a great kid, I get why you want to protect her.”

“She is,” agrees Kouyou, smiling a little as well. Then she shifts to her business voice. “This pointless squabble between us has taken up too much of both of our time, time that we don’t have to spare right now. We work best as a team. I trust you to have Kyouka’s best interests at heart.”

Kouyou extends a hand, and Chuuya doesn’t hesitate to walk around his desk so he can properly grab it and squeeze it.

“I agree,” says Chuuya, voice filled with affection and relief. “Whether Kyouka wants to be a musician or not should be left up to Kyouka. We should just do our best to support her.”

“Deal,” says Kouyou resolutely. Then she surprises him by pulling him into a hug. She’s never been one for physical affection.

He hugs her back. “Kouyou, seriously,” he says softly. “I’m not mad.”

“I never want to lose you over something as insignificant as work,” says Kouyou, her tone steady in comparison to how tightly she’s still holding onto him. “You will always come first to me.”

“Me too,” says Chuuya with a smile. “But you’re kind of crushing me.”

Kouyou makes an annoyed noise as she pulls away, but there’s still a hint of a smile on her face. Her smile shifts into something more devious then. “Now instead of wasting our energy focusing on each other, let’s show those imbeciles from The Guild and the ADA what Port Mafia Records is capable of.”

“I’ve missed your ruthlessness when it’s not directed at me,” says Chuuya with a smirk.

Dazai walks into work only about twenty minutes late. He’d have even possibly been close to on time if he hadn’t stopped for coffee at the cafe downstairs. He’s not exactly sure what he’d

gotten, he'd just told them to make it big and make it sweet (and because Dazai is a genius and makes sure to flirt with every single barista who works there his request had been fulfilled without any questions.)

Dazai takes a sip of his mystery drink as he opens the door to the ADA. They'd met his request perfectly, he tastes a pleasant concoction of flavors, possibly something vanilla and coconut. He puts a wide smile on his face as he enters the office.

Kunikida notices him right away, automatically looking up at the sound of someone entering the office. He's at his desk, and Atsushi is beside him holding some sheet music.

"You're late," Dazai anticipates hearing, "Why can't you ever be on time?" is another option, "This is not the time to be slacking off," if Kunikida is having a bad morning.

He had not expected Kunikida to give him a slightly surprised look and say, "I didn't think you'd be coming in today."

Dazai takes a bigger sip of his coffee than he'd intended to, almost having to spit some out. He swallows roughly and quickly recovers though. He raises a hand to his chest. "Kunikida, I am a dedicated employee of the Audio Detective Agency. I would never skip work."

"You're twenty minutes late," points out Kunikida, raising an eyebrow.

"Time is a social construct," says Dazai flippantly.

Kunikida makes a noise somewhat like a squawk. At least he's not asking Dazai about why he would or would not be here today anymore.

Dazai turns to Atsushi before Kunikida has a chance to ask further questions. "Did the songwriting bug bite?"

"I think I may have figured out the problem with the chorus," says Atsushi, a mix between nervous and hopeful. "I was just showing Kunikida."

"Spectacular," says Dazai brightly. He gestures towards the music room. "Let's go over it."

"Sure," agrees Atsushi. He's still looking at Dazai a little too closely though.

Dazai ignores this and takes another long sip of his coffee.

Ranpo walks into the office before they start to leave the room, flinging the door open wildly with one hand while he clutches a large box in the other.

"I got doughnuts," announces Ranpo with cheer (as if this is an out of the ordinary occurrence instead of something that sometimes happens more than once a week.) He raises an eyebrow when he notices Dazai. "Oh, you're here. I didn't think you'd be in today. I would have gotten that chocolate raspberry filled one you like."

Normally, Dazai would be touched and impressed that Ranpo had paid enough attention to someone else to pick up on what doughnut they liked. Instead he has to fight to keep a smile

on his face instead of a scowl.

“I love all doughnuts,” says Dazai, waving a hand dismissively. He starts walking towards the music room at a normal pace, despite how his mind is telling him to rush. “Grab one if you want, Atsushi.”

Dazai clutches his coffee so tightly it’s kind of hurting his hand as he opens the door to the music room, but it’s making him feel marginally better. He walks over to the table and settles into one of the chairs, leaning back and taking another long sip of coffee.

It is possible that he hadn’t slept much last night. Possibly due to the fact that a certain someone had been trending on social media so close to today’s date, and Dazai had possibly spent the entire night analyzing a shoddy camera phone video of said certain someone singing a ridiculous song in a shabby L.A. restaurant to try and figure out if that someone was okay.

(And how the hell Chuuya had managed to make Dazai enjoy the monstrosity that is *Twilight* is another conundrum. Another song ruined for him by Chuuya. He should start making a playlist.)

Dazai has never claimed to have perfect attendance at the ADA. Sometimes he misses a day here or there, never enough to get him in real trouble with anyone besides Kunikida. The days he’d skipped were in no particular pattern, and he hadn’t expected his coworkers to notice that he’d never come in on this particular day for the past three years.

He usually spends a portion of today at a particular grave. It doesn’t take up his entire day, but he’d never felt up to being in the company of others after going there. He’d preferred to be alone until he could collect himself again.

This year Dazai had felt he couldn’t justify skipping work when he and Atsushi are this close to finishing writing his single. If Dazai hadn’t been such a perfectionist, they would probably already be done.

But Dazai isn’t going to be satisfied until the song is perfect. Music that makes people feel lighter isn’t the goal this time. This time he’s going back to his roots. Music that people connect to, that makes them *feel* something, that is what he is aiming to achieve.

*Beast Beneath The Moonlight* is almost there. Dazai will admit he’d been skeptical when Atsushi had initially pitched the idea for the song to him.

“Have you ever heard the legend of the tiger man?” Atsushi had asked a few days after Dazai had talked him into writing the song. He’d started fiddling around with some melodies but had yet to write any lyrics yet.

“Tiger man?” Dazai had repeated, keeping his voice perfectly neutral. They’d been alone in the music room, Dazai had been looking over Tanizaki’s latest song from Light Snow that Kunikida has requested his assistance with. He’d looked up from the sheet music with a politely interested expression.



“Yeah,” Atsushi had said, leaning towards Dazai from his spot at the table. “I’ve been thinking about what you said, about writing a song that tells a story.” He’d looked Dazai in the eyes with a faintly excited expression. “We didn’t have a lot of books at the orphanage, most of them were old and falling apart. So I read the ones we did have probably a hundred times. One of them was a book of old Chinese legends. My favorite was always the one about the tiger man.”

“What’s it about?” Dazai had asked, putting Tanizaki’s song down to pay full attention. He’d hoped it wasn’t something weird. He’d hate to crush Atsushi’s very first idea.

“There’s a man walking along a road where a man-eating tiger is said to roam,” Atsushi had said, not hesitating over the words at all. He’d clearly known the story by heart. “He comes face to face with the tiger, but then the tiger starts to speak to him. He explains he was once a man, and he’d been an aspiring poet. He’d lived in seclusion, working tirelessly to write something to compare to the legendary poets he respected. But he failed to become successful, so he quit writing and took a job as a government worker. His hatred of his new job drove him insane, and he transformed into a tiger.”

Dazai had maintained his neutral expression while Atsushi talked, but it hadn’t been easy. He had not known what to make of the story. Luckily Atsushi hadn’t been finished yet.

“The tiger explained that it was his cowardly pride and arrogant shame that caused his transformation,” Atsushi had continued. “His fear of failure and his inability to ask for help from others led him to waste his talent.” He’d half-shrugged. “It’s ultimately a story about a man who lets his doubts consume his humanity.”

Dazai had felt uneasy over the word *humanity* but disregarded that to consider the story as a whole. Atsushi had watched him with a blatantly nervous expression. It had been clear it was more than just an old story to Atsushi. Dazai had heard his attachment to it in the delivery.

It had made sense, Atsushi latching onto a tale of why you shouldn’t let your doubts stop you from seeking your artistic dreams. Dazai had smiled genuinely as he pictured them adapting the legend into a song. It had the promise of being something truly substantial.

“Grab us some sheet music,” Dazai had ordered brightly. “Let’s talk lyrics.”

Since then they’d almost finished the song. Dazai had made Atsushi do most of the work, mainly overseeing and telling him when something didn’t sound right. He’d gone back to analyzing every note, every word of the music until everything flowed flawlessly.

Atsushi had put up with his endless revisions and extremely high standards. He’s just as determined if not more for the song to be successful. Dazai has noticed he barely listens to other music anymore, focusing on *Beast Beneath the Moonlight* completely.

If they can just finish tweaking a few final things they can start recording and schedule a release date. So Dazai had put her personal business on hold for the moment. He hadn’t anticipated being confronted about it.

“I grabbed you a doughnut,” says Atsushi as he walks into the music room. He carries a pastry in each hand. He smiles at Dazai carefully.

“Thanks,” says Dazai easily. He makes no move to take it when Atsushi sets it down in front of him. “Show me your adjustment of the chorus.”

Dazai is able to dive into songwriting for the next couple hours and ignore his other thoughts. Atsushi’s proposal to fix the chorus ends up working, and Dazai is doing another run through of the song looking for errors but not finding any.

“We should have Ranpo look over it,” says Dazai, turning to give Atsushi a small smile. “If he doesn’t find anything, we might have our final version.”

“Really?” asks Atsushi excitedly. “That’s great.”

There’s a knock on the door, and Dazai is surprised to see the president stick his head in the door. He’s been even more absent than usual lately.

“Atsushi,” says Fukuzawa with his usual neutral expression, “Do you have a moment to discuss the legal-oh, Dazai. We didn’t think you would be coming in today.”

“Well, here I am,” says Dazai in a tight voice. His smile is hard to maintain.

“I didn’t mean to interrupt,” says Fukuzawa, not reacting to Dazai’s thinly concealed annoyance. “How are things coming along?”

“If things work out how I think we should be set to record next week,” says Dazai, voice going back to something more normal.

“That’s excellent news,” says Fukuzawa, a light smile on his face. “Good work you two.”

“Thank you, sir,” says Atsushi gratefully, bowing his head a little.

“We can talk later, Atsushi,” says Fukuzawa, withdrawing from the room. “It’s not urgent.”

Dazai watches him go, curious what he’d wanted to talk to Atsushi about. He’s still keeping the details of his legal battle with Francis to himself. Dazai isn’t sure if it’s because he doesn’t want the rest of them to interfere or if he truly has it handled.

Not that he’d ever confront Fukuzawa about it. Dazai had already connected Fukuzawa with someone Santoka recommended and then the social worker Odasaku had worked with when he’d fostered kids. There really isn’t anything more Dazai can do to help except make *Beast Beneath the Moonlight* be the ADA’s first number one single.

“Dazai,” says Atsushi, and the concern he’s obviously been trying to hold back all morning is clear in his voice, “If there’s somewhere you’d rather be-.”

“There isn’t,” snaps Dazai viciously, a tone he’s never used with Atsushi before. It just comes out involuntarily.

He instantly regrets it when Atsushi flinches and looks at the ground with a guilty expression.

“Sorry,” he says quietly.

“That was uncalled for,” says Dazai, his voice full of frustration instead of anger, rubbing his eyes. “It’s true I usually spend today elsewhere, but that’s much less important than finishing this song.”

“We could take the song with us,” offers Atsushi carefully, obviously still a little way that Dazai will snap at him again. “Go where you usually spend the day.”

Dazai can’t help the bark of laughter that escapes him. “It’s not the sort of place you want to write music.”

“Well, then we can give the song to Ranpo and take a break,” says Atsushi, surprising Dazai by not backing down, a tenacious look in his eyes. “You said we’re pretty much done on our end.”

“You don’t have to do this,” says Dazai plainly, giving him a confused look.

“I know that,” says Atsushi, some annoyance creeping into his voice. “You know, the man in the legend didn’t turn into a tiger only because of his doubts. It was his inability to let others help him as well.”

Dazai can’t remember that last time he felt so called out. He looks at Atsushi with wide eyes, which Atsushi meets with a determined look.

“Okay then,” says Dazai, dropping his cheerful act and displaying how much of a terrible day he’s having. He will allow himself this break, will allow this lapse in his defenses, just for today. “I’d prefer to go alone.”

Atsushi starts to scowl, but Dazai speaks up again and holds up a hand. “Not because I don’t want you there. But where I’m going would be an invasion of privacy of someone other than myself, the details are not mine to share.”

“Oh,” says Atsushi, eyes and facial expression softening. “Well, text me if you need anything.”

Dazai stands up, reaching over to ruffle Atsushi’s hair. “Thanks.” The word comes out gentle, honest.

For all the years that he's been coming here, the graveyard never really changes. Dazai has yet to encounter another person any of the times he's been here. It's quiet as he makes his way to the grave he seeks. The sounds of the city are muffled here, and Dazai feels like his own thoughts are louder.

"Well, here we are again, Fuku," says Dazai as he reaches her grave. He feels they've reached a first name basis after the time they've spent together. He sits down, leaning against the headstone. That's probably disrespectful, which brings a tiny smile to his face.

"I actually saw Chuuya this past year," says Dazai, closing his eyes. "Just a couple months ago. He's the same. Short, angry, more full of life than everyone around him."

"I think I'm giving up on getting over him," says Dazai, admitting it for the first time. He opens his eyes, looking up at the clear sky. The weather perfectly contrasts with how he feels. "Nothing seems to work. Not time, not distance, not having him basically tell me to my face he can't stand me."

"So I think we're stuck with each other, Fuku," says Dazai, laughing a little. "I'm always going to care about him, so I'm always going to hate you. Your grave will never be forgotten, not while I'm alive."

Dazai sighs, standing up and kicking the grass over the grave a little aggressively (but not enough to warrant grave desecration charges, he can no longer afford those kinds of fees).

"Oh, I almost forgot to mention," says Dazai, raising a hand as if there's someone there to see the gesture. He smiles widely at the headstone. "You're one of the worst creatures to ever inhabit this earth, and if the designation of nonhuman belongs to anyone it's you. Stay toasty in hell!" He starts walking away, calling over his shoulder, "See you next year!"

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## **June, Six Years, Four and a Half Months Since the Release of Corruption**

Dazai has never been wrong with his predictions of what music is going to do well, but having *Beast Beneath the Moonlight* hit number one is absurdly relieving.

Recording the song had gone smoothly, and the whole office had come together to finish everything for the single in record time. It had been released the first week of June, and had been an immediate critical success.

It had been doing well commercially too, and Atsushi had done interview after interview to promote it. Dazai hadn't been able to media train him as thoroughly as he would have liked to, but Atsushi's kindness and sincerity had gone over well with the masses. He'd started to gain a small following quickly.

But the thing that had really pushed the song into being a hit had been an interview with Ryunosuke Akutagawa, who was asked about his opinion of the song.

"I think it's mediocre," Akutagawa had replied flatly.

The song had exploded in popularity almost immediately after. Some things never change, people *always* love a good scandal.

Despite their focus on The Guild, Dazai is still always waiting for some kind of move from Port Mafia Records. They've remained unnerving silent about everything. Although they have been pumping out an exorbitant amount of music lately, even for them. Dazai can't even keep track of the number of albums that get released with Chuuya as one of the producers.

They're definitely up to something, but Dazai has no idea what. Mori, unlike music, has never been easy to predict. Dazai still holds a strange begrudging respect for the man, as a businessman if nothing else.

He again keeps these reservations to himself. Everyone at the ADA is giddy about Atsushi's success, and Dazai can admit he's rather satisfied as well. It's strange, he feels a little more attached to *Beast Beneath the Moonlight* than many of the songs on his own album.

Dazai also hasn't been this genuinely content in a while. It's been gratifying to see Atsushi come into his own, especially knowing all the struggles he'd faced to get to this point. Dazai feels like he's accomplished something beyond music. It had been one thing trying to make music that could help people but another thing entirely to try to help someone make music to help themselves.

Atsushi is in the office now after only being present sporadically the single had been released. His smile has almost never left his face for weeks. He's sitting with Ranpo and Kenji at the long table (that still shows no signs of being removed) and drinking a cup of tea.

Dazai is at Kunikida's desk with him and Tanizaki, going over a song called *The Tattoer* for Tanizaki's album. It's a little darker than Dazai would have expected from Tanizaki, but not in a bad way. Fukuzawa has estimated a fall release for Light Snow, so they have some time to get it right.

It's getting late in the day, which is why it's a surprise when someone barges into the ADA without warning (Dazai's suggestion that they should start locking the door had not been accepted.) Francis has the same smirk on his face he'd had two months ago, but he isn't alone this time. A young girl with red hair in two braids trails behind him, looking around their office with disdain. The skirt of her dress swishes around as she walks into the room.

"Hello there," says Francis brightly. "Yukichi in?" The girl with him keeps surveying the room, glaring at anyone she makes eye contact with.

The easy going atmosphere of the room has vanished. They're all looking at their "guests" with various levels of animosity. Even Kenji is giving Francis a disapproving look, which is practically stabbing someone coming from him.

"The president has better things to do than waste his time speaking to you," says Kunikida stiffly.

"That's enough, Doppo," says Fukuzawa, walking into the room and giving Francis a flat stare. Yosano follows behind him, settling in to watch while leaning against the wall. "What

are you doing here Francis?”

“I *did* say I’d be back, didn’t I?” asks Francis obnoxiously. “I am a man of my word after all.”

The girl who came in with Francis takes a seat on their break area couch, seemingly uninterested in the conversation. Dazai gives her a searching look, but he doesn’t recognize her. He’s fairly certain he knows who all of The Guild’s artists are. Another Mori philosophy from Sun Tzu, know thy enemy.

“You lost the court case,” says Fukuzawa, crossing his arms. “You have nothing left to gain by coming here.”

Dazai can’t help the surprised look on his face. He glances over at Kunikida to see a similar expression. So he hadn’t know either. Actually, surveying the room everyone looks stunned by the news.

“Yes, that was a shock,” says Francis easily with a shrug. “That social worker you brought in was a real firecracker. The court system has gone soft, caring more about the wellbeing of people than the actual law.”

Dazai smirks a little at that revelation. He’ll have to thank Odasaku for the referral the next time he speaks to him.

“Or they’ve grown more honorable,” says Fukuzawa, frowning at Francis with contempt. “They recognize that there are cases where the law isn’t correct.”

“You didn’t use to be this sanctimonious when we were younger,” says Francis, rolling his eyes. Fukuzawa’s scorn seems to roll right off him. “Ogai must find being in your presence nauseating.”

“I wouldn’t know,” says Fukuzawa shortly. “I haven’t seen him in years.”

“I didn’t come here to talk about him,” says Francis, placing a hand on his hip. “Though he’ll get what’s coming to him.”

“Then why are you here?” asks Fukuzawa pointedly.

Francis turns to face Atsushi, who is possibly giving Francis the look with the most revulsion in the whole room. “Atsushi, do you really still believe you can be as successful here as you would be with The Guild?”

“In case you haven’t noticed, *Beast Beneath the Moonlight* is the number one song in America right now,” says Atsushi, his tone filled with hostility.

“Yes, it has been rather amusing to watch you all fumble through releasing a song of that caliber,” says Francis, smirking widely. “If you knew more about the music industry you’d be embarrassed how poorly of a job your record label is doing for you.”

“The ADA have fully supported me,” says Atsushi, crossing his arms.

Francis snorts. “Of course. That’s why you released your single without any kind of comprehensive marketing plan, no major interviews, and artwork that looks like it was drawn by a five year old. If that head case Akutagawa hadn’t publicly mocked you then your song would have dwindled into obscurity.”

“What do you seek to gain here, Francis?” asks Fukuzawa, obviously losing patience. “Atsushi has made his decision, you’ve lost. Move on.”

“I just wanted to see if Atsushi still held the delusion this company is capable of offering him the same level of success as mine,” says Francis lightly, and there’s something in his tone that automatically raises Dazai’s suspicions.

“It’s clear that he believes that we are,” says Fukuzawa. His expression is also wary.

“Do you care to put that theory to the test?” asks Francis, and Dazai feels like a trap has just been sprung.

“What are you suggesting?” Fukuzawa narrows his eyes at Francis.

“I suggest we hold a fundraiser,” says Francis, eyes gleaming a little. “I can set the whole thing up. You can have whomever you want perform, and we’ll do the same. Whoever ends up raising more money will be declared the winner.” He’d paused a moment for dramatic effect. “The prize will be that the winner gets to pick one artist from the loser to sign with them.” It’s very apparent who he will be picking if he wins.

“And what would this fundraiser be for?” asks Fukuzawa flatly, showing no signs of interest in Francis’s proposal.

“Towards the research of the care of those with brain injuries,” says Francis, tone a little sharper. His smile is dangerously big.

Dazai looks at the president, holding back an eye roll. It’s an absolutely ridiculous challenge. Fukuzawa is never going to agree to it. With the financial connections Francis and everyone else at The Guild has, it would be a complete farce. They would have no chance. Now that they’ve settled the legal matter between their companies, they have no reason to agree to this.

“We’ll do it,” declares Fukuzawa fiercely. His eyes are practically blazing as he stares down Francis.

Dazai lets out a small noise of shock. He’s not the only one either. Everyone is staring at the president in various expressions of disbelief. Even Ranpo’s jaw is hanging open.

“Excellent,” says Francis merrily. His smile gets impossibly bigger. “I’ll be in touch about the details. I’ll give you a little time to prepare. Let’s shoot for mid-August?”

“Agreed,” says Fukuzawa with a nod.

They shake hands, and Dazai feels like he’s dreaming. This isn’t actually happening. But Kunikida’s sharp inhale next to him proves he’s very awake.

“Are we done here?” asks the girl who Francis came in with, getting up from the couch. Dazai had almost forgotten about her. She has an accent that Dazai can’t place immediately, something northern.

“Ah, yes,” says Francis, beckoning her forward. “How terribly rude of me. I didn’t introduce you. This is our newest artist, Lucy Maud Montgomery. Say hello, Lucy.”

“Hello,” says Lucy insolently, turning up her nose at them.

“See you all in August,” says Francis, not waiting for any of them to respond. He flashes them another huge grin as he walks towards the door. “I’m looking forward to it.”

Lucy follows behind him, shooting them one last glare, her eyes lingering on Atsushi in particular for a moment.

The room is quiet after they’re gone. Dazai exchanges glances with Kunikida, who looks equally disturbed by everything that’s just happened. Tanizaki is giving the president an absolutely bewildered look from beside them.

“I’ve told you all I detest squabbling between record companies,” says Fukuzawa, turning to face the room with a grave expression. “And this one has gone on long enough. If doing this contest is the way to get The Guild to back off for good, so be it. Francis is the delusional one, thinking money is all that matters in this world. I look forward to proving him wrong.”

The president then smiles lightly. “So let’s get to it. We have a lot of work to do to prepare.”

The very next day Lucy Maud Montgomery releases *Anne of Abyssal Red*. It shoots to number one within hours.

Chuuya thinks *Anne of Abyssal Red* is brilliant, if a touch unsettling. A song about a girl who’s so lonely she traps people in her playroom is interesting to say the least. Lucy Maud Montgomery is clearly talented. It’s unfortunate he can’t appreciate that talent as she’s signed with The Guild.



He does feel some slight satisfaction when she knocks *Beast Beneath the Moonlight* out of the number one spot. Chuuya thinks Atsushi Nakajima's song is superior, but it's nice to see the ADA fail. Hopefully it'll ease the pressure off of Akutagawa, who has been in hot water ever since he'd accidentally given the song a popularity boost.

"I was just being honest," he'd snapped when Chuuya had talked to him about it. All the media training in the world had not changed him much. "I'm not sorry for saying it."

He had been sorry when he'd had to have a long conversation with Mori about it though. Since then, he's been watching his words more carefully. Luckily his tour and his album are successful enough that Mori isn't too annoyed with him. Chuuya thinks part of the reason Akutagawa had said it was because before Atsushi came along Akutagawa and *Rashomon* were a shoe in for artist of the year and song of the year respectively, but now that might not be the case.

Chuuya is in his office currently, drinking his tea while he catches up on all the emails he'd gotten since last night when he'd left. Not that it had been all that long ago, these days he pretty much only goes home to sleep. His workload hasn't decreased at all, if anything its grown.

"*My life is a perfect graveyard of buried hopes,*" comes Lucy's voice through his computer speakers. Fuck, this song is dark. Chuuya loves it. He really wishes that she worked for less slimy people.

He pauses it when someone knocks on his door. "Come in," he calls out, muffling a sigh. There goes his opportunity for a peaceful morning.

Mori is the one who walks in the door though, surprising him. Only because these days he usually just walks in without knocking.

"Are any of the songs from Kyouka's album suitable for a single?" asks Mori, not bothering with pleasantries. He walks towards Chuuya's desk with purpose.

"We could potentially make one of them work," says Chuuya, frowning as he thinks it over. "But I don't think any of them are impactful enough for a brand new artist if you're thinking what I think you are."

"We've let our rivals go unchallenged for too long when it comes to new artists," says Mori, crossing his arms. "Kyouka needs to put out a single. As soon as possible."

"I'll get to work on it," says Chuuya, feeling the burden of yet another task settle over him.

"I'll check back in for a progress report soon," says Mori, already turning to leave. He doesn't look back or say anything else.

Chuuya waits until the door closes behind him before letting out a slightly unhinged laugh.

"*Fuck,*" he says to himself.

One of the most irritating things about his schedule these past months is that Chuuya honestly doesn't have the time to shatter his phone. He needs it for work, and it would take too long to replace.

Chuuya chugs the rest of his tea and goes to find Kyouka. If he doesn't have time to get a new phone, he certainly doesn't have time to mope. He checks Kouyou's office first, but she tells him that Kyouka is down in one of the music rooms trying out a song. Chuuya thanks her but doesn't stop to explain, he's sure she'll hear soon enough.

Kyouka is singing when he enters the room Kouyou told him he'd find her in. Chuuya can't fight off a smile at that fact. She's no longer indifferent towards the development of her album. She's now got five songs locked in for it after adapting them into her style. It's not moving along at the pace Mori would prefer, but it's practically light speed compared to how things were before.

Plus their speed now has more to do with how particular Kyouka is about the songs for her album. She won't accept any songs that she doesn't truly like. Chuuya respects her for it.

Kyouka stops singing when she notices him though, pulling down the headphones she'd been wearing. She's alone in the room. Kouyou must have been planning to join her later.

"What's going on?" asks Kyouka, apparently reading the tension coming off Chuuya. Chuuya doesn't know if it's due to his poor acting, her perceptiveness, or how they've become closer since he'd tricked her into coming to karaoke night.

"You want to get out of here?" offers Chuuya, smirking at her.

As opposed to how she would have reacted before, Kyouka smiles back at him. She pulls off her headphones completely and follows Chuuya without hesitation.

Chuuya doesn't even take a PMR van for the thrill of it like he usually does, it's just conveniently closer than his own car. Kyouka gives him a wry look but doesn't comment on it. She stays quiet as they head towards their destination. She seems to understand Chuuya has something he wants to talk to her about.

Chuuya pulls into the parking lot of his favorite ice cream place, parking farther away from the building. He pulls out his credit card and hands it to Kyouka.

"Could you get me a chocolate cone and whatever you want?" asks Chuuya.

"Do you not want to be recognized?" asks Kyouka, frowning at him.

"Yes, but not like that," says Chuuya, laughing a little. "The guy who owns the place knows I used to take ice cream from here all the time when I was a teenager. He's always a dick to me."

Kyouka shakes her head but goes to get them ice cream without further comment. Chuuya turns up the radio while she's gone, looking out at the ocean in front of him. It's helping to diffuse his sour mood already. There are just some places where you can't be angry.

Kyouka comes back a couple minutes later and hands him a chocolate cone, eating a strawberry one herself. Chuuya takes some time to eat his, debating how to word what he wants to say.

Fittingly, *Beast Beneath the Moonlight* comes on the radio. Atsushi's voice sings the lyrics with skill and sincerity. *"I found myself wondering why I had once been a human being...How can others understand what I feel? They cannot--unless they have experienced the very same thing."*

Honestly, the reason Chuuya can't stand the song is because he likes it so much. It feels eerily like the lyrics are directed right at him, though Chuuya had watched an interview of Atsushi explaining the song was based on an old Chinese legend. Still, it hits far too close to home.

And the deeper reason Chuuya hates it is that Dazai had clearly put his full effort into helping produce it. The composition is flawless. The song is one of the best things Chuuya has heard in years. But Chuuya can't understand why Dazai would try so hard for this random kid when he wouldn't do the same for his own album. It's extremely irritating.

The song does serve as a good segue to what they need to discuss though.

"What do you think of *Beast Beneath the Moonlight*?" asks Chuuya, turning the volume down a little bit.

"I know we don't get along with the ADA," says Kyouka neutrally.

Chuuya snorts. "You can say what you really think. It's just us."

"I think it's amazing," says Kyouka quietly, a light flush on her face.

"I agree," says Chuuya simply. He looks at the ocean instead of at her. "Have you ever thought about writing a song?"

She takes a long moment to respond. "I don't think I would be very good at it."

Chuuya turns to face her then, a confused expression on his face. She's never been one to doubt her abilities.

Kyouka picks at the paper wrapping on her cone. "I'm comfortable speaking and singing in English. But I tend to write better in Japanese."

"Why couldn't you write a song in Japanese then?" asks Chuuya with a shrug, smiling at her.

Kyouka's eyes narrow as she looks at him. "Because songs in foreign languages don't do as well."

"There's been tons of songs that weren't in English that have done well," points out Chuuya. "And you work for Port Mafia Records, the marketing mastermind of the music world. You never have to worry about something like that. All you have to worry about is the music."

"Why are you asking?" asks Kyouka, her expression not lightening at all.

“The ADA has Atsushi Nakajima. The Guild has Lucy Maud Montgomery.” Chuuya sighs. “We’d like to have you be our piece on the chessboard.”

“A single,” says Kyouka, immediately picking up on the situation. Her frown deepens. “Did you bring me to get ice cream to bribe me?”

“Don’t be a brat,” says Chuuya, rolling his eyes. He points his cone at her. “I brought you here because I wanted to talk about it where there weren’t any prying ears. You don’t *have* to be the one to write the single. We could get someone else to do it.” He gives her a meaningful look. “But the request for the single came from Mori, so it’s happening.”

Kyouka eats some of her ice cream, thinking over his words. “I don’t know how to write a song,” she says eventually.

“You don’t have to write it on your own,” says Chuuya, taking a bite of his own cone. “I’ll help. Kouyou’ll help. Hirotsu too. There’s literally a legion of songwriters at your disposal.”

“I’m not sure why you think I should be the one to write it,” says Kyouka, still clearly not convinced.

“I love singing pretty much anything,” says Chuuya. He eats the last of his cone and flicks the crumbs to the floor of the van. “But I sing my best when I’m doing a song that I helped create. It’s that way for most artists. And I won’t lie and say it doesn’t have a little bit to do with how Atsushi and Lucy wrote their own songs.”

Kyouka nods, finishing off the last of her own cone. She gives Chuuya a serious look. “I will try,” she says, her tone heavy.

Chuuya gives her an encouraging smile. “Let’s go get started then.” He turns on the van and heads back the way they came from.

“Are we going back to PMR?” asks Kyouka.

“Nah, I tend to write best elsewhere,” says Chuuya easily. “Writing at the office makes it feel like work.”

“It is work,” says Kyouka, it coming out somewhat like a question.

“Not if you’re doing it right,” says Chuuya, smiling and shaking his head. “I’ve got a piano in my apartment if you’re cool with going there. Some guitars too.”

“That’s fine,” says Kyouka with a nod. “But shouldn’t you be returning this van?” she asks, her voice full of judgment.

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### **Mid-July, Six Years, Five and a Half Months Since the Release of Corruption**

Dazai remembers those few weeks after the release of *Beast Beneath the Moonlight* fondly, how excited and pleased everyone had been. Since the moment Fukuzawa had agreed to do the fundraiser, there hasn’t been a single moment of peace.

Dazai had thought they had worked hard to get *Beast Beneath the Moonlight* out quickly. But once Francis had left the office that day in June it was like they'd all gone into overdrive.

Ranpo has taken a break from songwriting to take over their social media accounts. He's gained them all thousands of followers. His witty posts have been extremely popular. Ranpo seems to be enjoying himself too, calling it a fun challenge to keep up with all the trends and strange news people flock to.

Yosano has become Atsushi's handler of sorts. Almost everywhere he goes, she isn't far behind. She adjusts his clothes, his makeup (which he hadn't even been wearing before), and tells him to stand up straight. She's drawing on all of her training from when she'd been a singer.

She's just as intense about it as she is about editing. "People love an amateur at first," Yosano had said to Atsushi after she'd first started working with him. "But only professionals last in this industry. Put on the eyeliner."

Dazai had anticipated that he'd be the one helping Atsushi, but he'd been given a very different role. Fukuzawa had given the same speech to him and Kunikida.

"You will be performing at this fundraiser," the president had said. It had been a command, not an offer. "These performances need to be immaculate. Both of you need to start getting your voices back into shape immediately. You also need to both jump back into the public eye. Interviews, industry events, being photographed out and about. People need to be reminded how much they like Spring Birds and Once More With Feeling."

Dazai hadn't been ordered to behave a certain way for his career in many years. He'd had to bite back a refusal just on instinct. But he and Kunikida had both done what the president had asked. Dazai's teeth are starting to hurt from the amount of fake smiling he's been doing lately.

It is Atsushi who is working the hardest though. As their new star, he is the one everyone wants to see, the one everyone wants to talk to and about. He's constantly on the go, singing *Beast Beneath the Moonlight* on talk shows, for radio stations, everywhere really. He does interviews with journalists, bloggers, off the cuff on his social media. Ranpo has made him start vlogging throughout the week, telling him the people want to know what he's like off the stage too.

If you had asked Dazai if Atsushi would be able to handle the pressure back in March, he would have flatly said no. But Atsushi has risen to the occasion. He gets his jam-packed itinerary every day and never complains once. His determination helps keep the rest of them in line. If Atsushi can handle his part, it looks bad if they can't do theirs.

Tanizaki, Kenji, and the clerks do whatever other tasks come up. There's always something. Phone calls need to be returned, emails need to be sent, supplies need to be bought (clothes, accessories, actual food.)

There had been a debate at the beginning whether they should release one of Tanizaki's finished song as a single too to get him as a piece on the board, but they'd ultimately decided

against it.

“We’ve already picked our horse in this race,” Ranpo had said during the debate. “If we try to push for two at once the first one could lose momentum.”

In normal words, he’d meant they needed to focus on Atsushi right now. Trying to promote two new artists at once could make Atsushi seem less unique. They also didn’t have the manpower to adequately push two rising stars at once (frankly, they truly didn’t have the manpower for one.)

Tanizaki had accepted the decision without a fuss. He understands what’s at stake here. He’d jumped into his role as a helper with enthusiasm, deciding that was the best way he could help. Dazai had been impressed with his maturity.

The president works on their setlist for the fundraiser, coming up with their best possible lineup. He also works with Francis to finalize the details of the fundraiser. They’ve picked a venue in Los Angeles, the same one Dazai had played his first Double Black concert at. If he had the time to be irritated about that, he would be.

The first couple weeks had been a battle focused on getting *Beast Beneath the Moonlight* back up to number one. It and *Anne of Abyssal Red* had traded the top spot back and forth what felt like one million times. Then at the beginning of July it had seemed like they had finally secured the top spot for the time being.

Then came Kyouka Izumi and *Demon Snow*.

The very first time Dazai had heard the song, he’d know he had been right. Port Mafia Records hadn’t pulled out of this war, they’d just been biding their time.

The song skyrockets in sales the second it’s released. Kyouka’s powerful voice combined with the ethereal Japanese lyrics propel it to number one easily. She’s practically an overnight sensation.

And nobody does marketing like PMR. They show her off just enough to let people get a glimpse of her, but they keep her as a mystery for the most part. Dazai isn’t sure if the girl is actually shy or if it’s an act, but it’s working masterfully. There had been no chance of Atsushi taking the top spot when he was up against that.

And of course Chuuya Nakahara had been listed as one of the songwriters. It figures he would have a hand in creating what’s been dubbed “the song of the summer.”

Port Mafia Records has taken over the music industry’s spotlight again by force. Atsushi and Lucy are still favorites, but they pale in comparison to Kyouka. Dazai can practically hear Mori laughing at getting one up on The Guild and the ADA with a single move, effortlessly proving their failure with Atsushi had been a fluke. They’re still everyone’s favorite when it came to putting out young new artists.

It just drives the point further home. Everyone at the ADA is putting in all this effort, and it’s so obvious that they’re going to lose.

No one will say it though. Everyone maintains that they'll find a way to pull it off. Dazai sees the doubt on his coworkers' faces though. No matter how big they get, they don't have the same pull as The Guild.

Dazai goes over the potential numbers in his head practically every day, and they don't come close no matter what new strategy they try. He hasn't been this frustrated with work since he'd been eighteen, when he'd been fighting a different losing battle.

Dazai has never doubted Yukichi Fukuzawa before, but he can't figure out what he had been thinking when he'd agreed to do this. It would have been bad enough if just their pride was on the line, but Dazai can't believe he'd actually offer up Atsushi like this.

It's baffling him, and the president hasn't explained his reasoning. He just maintains that they will find a way to come out on top.

Dazai is actually in the office today, having a break between all the appearances he's been making. He hadn't realized how much he'd missed the tiny little place until he'd walked in the doors today and felt immediately more at ease.

He's sitting at his desk typing out a reply to an email when the door opens. Dazai looks up to see Atsushi entering, which is a surprise. He's in the office even less than Dazai is these days.

Atsushi isn't alone though. A girl trails behind him.

"Atsushi," calls out Dazai cheerfully. "Did you bring your girlfriend in?"

Then as they come forward Dazai gets a better look at the girl and the smile drops from his face. He gives Atsushi a searching look, raising an eyebrow at him.

"Why have you brought Kyouka Izumi here?" asks Dazai, disapproval clear in his tone.

Atsushi grabs Kyouka by the wrist and pulls her over to Dazai's desk. She's even shorter in person than she looks in pictures.

"Kyouka, this is Osamu Dazai," says Atsushi, ignoring Dazai's question. He's looking at Kyouka with clear gentleness.

"I know who he is," says Kyouka flatly. She moves a little to stand behind Atsushi more.

Dazai maintains his searching look, crossing his arms at Atsushi.

Atsushi sighs. "Kyouka needs help getting out of her record deal with Port Mafia Records."

Dazai goes from confused to frowning deeply. "And that's our business how?"

Atsushi frowns back, gesturing with his hand that's not holding onto Kyouka in frustration. "Well, you have experience with it. You got out of yours."

"I did *not*," clarifies Dazai, uncrossing his arms and leaning forward. "I waited for it to expire. And I was only able to do that because I used to be an executive and had adequate

leverage. Otherwise I would have been blacklisted in the music industry immediately.”

“Even if they did blacklist her, the ADA doesn’t care about things like that,” says Atsushi fervently.

“We most certainly do,” says Dazai, narrowing his eyes at Atsushi. “We still need to work with people in the industry even if we don’t ever directly work with Port Mafia Records.”

“But they won’t blacklist her if she signs here,” argues Atsushi. “They don’t want to make a move against you. Like you said, you have leverage.”

“I have leverage for myself, and Fukuzawa has leverage for the ADA,” explains Dazai slowly. “But breaking a recording contract is cut and dry. We wouldn’t win that court case. I used to draw up PMR recording contracts, they are iron clad. If Kyouka signed one, there’s nothing we can do to help her. Which you have still not explained why we should in the first place.”

Atsushi gives him a disappointed look. “Shouldn’t you understand why someone wouldn’t want to work for them?”

“My reasons were my own,” says Dazai, tone just a touch sharper. “They wouldn’t apply to anyone else.”

“I told you this was a bad idea,” says Kyouka quietly. She’s staring at the floor.

“No, it isn’t,” says Atsushi, squeezing her wrist comfortingly. He gives Dazai a pleading look.

“Kyouka,” says Dazai, slipping into his fake kind voice. “Why don’t you help yourself to some tea while Atsushi and I have a little chat?”

It’s clearly not a suggestion. Kyouka pulls away from Atsushi and goes over to the break area, posture very stiff.

“Explain,” says Dazai once they’re alone, dropping all cheerfulness.

“I don’t get why you’re being so resistant to the idea,” says Atsushi. “You guys did the exact same thing for me.”

“Atsushi, you hadn’t actually signed a recording contract with them,” says Dazai, not enjoying Atsushi’s holier than thou mentality one bit. “Since when do you even know her?”

“Does it matter how long I’ve known her?” asks Atsushi crossly.

Dazai’s look clearly expresses that it does.

“Fine, I met her today,” admits Atsushi, crossing his arms. “I took a break and went to the beach. We just ran into each other. I told her I liked her single, and she told me she liked mine too. We got to talking, then she told me she’d realized after she put out *Demon Snow* that she doesn’t want to be a singer, not yet.” Atsushi’s tone lightens, and he uncrosses his arms. “Her



mom wanted her to finish school before pursuing music. I told her that was something she could easily do here.”

“I’m not saying I don’t feel for her,” says Dazai, adopting a more gentle tone as well. “But there honestly isn’t anything we can do for her. I’m sorry.”

Atsushi looks sad rather than angry this time. “Shouldn’t we at least ask the president?”

“You’re welcome to,” says Dazai with a shrug. “But I don’t think he’ll tell you anything different.”

“I have to try,” says Atsushi lowly. He goes over to where Kyouka is waiting in the break area, arms wrapped around herself and looking at the counter. He leads her back towards the president’s office.

Dazai sighs as he watches them go. Port Mafia fucking Records, are they ever going to stop interfering with his life?

There’s less than three weeks until the fundraiser now. Things only get more frantic the closer it draws near. There still isn’t a clear path forward of how they’re going to win.

Fukuzawa has started holding weekly meetings to gauge where everyone is. They hold them in the main office at the long table. The meetings remind Dazai of executive meetings a little, though they’re a lot more pleasant. He never leaves a meeting with the need to punch something.

“We’re still steadily gaining followers on all types of social media,” reports Ranpo, chewing one of the croissants Fukuzawa had provided for the meeting (there had certainly never been snacks at a PMR executive meeting.) “Probably some bots too, but that’s pretty much unavoidable the bigger you get.”

“Good work, Ranpo,” says Fukuzawa from his spot at the head of the table. He turns to Kunikida then. Atsushi speaks up before the president can say anything though.

“I have an idea,” announces Atsushi, a little too loudly.

Dazai gives him a surprised look from the spot next to him. Atsushi hadn’t mentioned anything to him. Although he had been a little colder towards Dazai since Dazai had refused to help him with Kyouka, which had been irritating because he hadn’t gotten upset with the president when he’d told him basically the same thing.

“What is it, Atsushi?” asks Fukuzawa, also looking faintly surprised.

“I think we should ask Port Mafia Records to perform with us at the fundraiser,” says Atsushi, his words confident while his hands are trembling a little under the table.

“You want us to *what*?” asks Tanizaki, giving Atsushi an incredulous look.

“We don’t associate ourselves with companies like that,” says Kunikida, his look more disapproving than shocked.

Yosano doesn’t look very happy about the suggestion either, although she stays quiet. Ranpo pauses in eating his croissant, raising his eyebrows.

Dazai himself is feeling a myriad of emotions, so he settles for keeping his face blank and saying nothing. He has the slightest thought of where this plan will end up, and he cannot allow himself to dwell on it right now.

“Now, now,” says Fukuzawa, gaining control of the room again. “Let’s give Atsushi a chance to explain.”

“Port Mafia Records may appear to be operating as usual,” says Atsushi, giving the president a grateful look before continuing, “But things aren’t as they seem. The Guild has sabotaged their relationships throughout the music industry with their influence. They’ve been struggling, working frantically to maintain their image.”

“And how did you come across this information?” asks Dazai neutrally. It’s not that he doubts Atsushi. He can believe that Francis would try to take down Mori after he’d botched the recruitment, and he can easily imagine Mori continuing on as if nothing had happened.

“Kyouka Izumi told me,” says Atsushi, not apologetic in the least.

“We’re trusting the word of a fourteen year old girl?” asks Kunikida, looking much less convinced than Dazai. “She’s just one of their new artists. If they’re truly keeping it a secret, how would she know?”

“She’s close with both Kouyou Ozaki and Chuuya Nakahara,” says Atsushi. He doesn’t seem put off by Kunikida’s skepticism.

Dazai has to work even harder to keep his expression neutral. There goes that thought again.

“I know there’s a lot of bad history between a lot of people in this room and Port Mafia Records,” says Atsushi, standing up and speaking passionately. “Myself included. But I know that if we work with them, we can easily beat The Guild.”

“It’s not a bad idea,” says Dazai, shrugging a little. “But they won’t go for it.”

Atsushi deflates a little. “Why not?”

“Because they’d have nothing to gain,” says Dazai plainly. “Mori doesn’t care about taking down his enemies because of personal pride. He only acts when something is going to be beneficial to PMR. The ADA beating The Guild wouldn’t help them at all. They don’t like us anymore than they do The Guild.”

“Be that as it may,” says Fukuzawa, looking at Atsushi with approval, “I still think it’s worth trying.” He turns to face Dazai then. “Can you set up a meeting with Port Mafia Records?”

“Sure,” says Dazai easily, even though he’s pretty sure he can taste bile in the back of his throat.

They choose neutral ground for the meeting. Neither Mori nor Fukuzawa had been comfortable with meeting on the other’s turf. Dazai still doesn’t even have an inkling of their former relationship. Though he supposes that’s less important than trying to understand their current one.

Eventually a park in a quiet area of Los Angeles is chosen for the meeting place. Dazai arrives there with Kunikida and Fukuzawa slightly earlier than the meeting time they’d set. Dazai has had a stomach ache about this encounter even since he’d woken up this morning. Actually, he’s sort of felt nauseous since Fukuzawa had asked him to set up the meeting.

A black car pulls up to the park at exactly noon. Mori had always been punctual to a fault. He steps out of the car first, with Kouyou and Hirotsu following behind him.

Dazai keeps waiting for someone else to come out of the car too, but it’s clear after a moment that Chuuya isn’t going to be here. Dazai is both insanely relieved and more anxious.

“This was a surprise,” says Mori as he approaches their group. His fake cheerful smile is more familiar than Dazai wants it to be. Seeing him again in person is revolting. “I couldn’t quite believe it when Kouyou told me you wanted to set up a meeting.”

Dazai’s eyes flick to Kouyou then, who is watching him back. He’d set up the meeting through her. Dazai had still had her personal number, and he’d figured she would be interested in meeting if Dazai mentioned a potential arrangement that involved Kyouka getting out of her recording contract at the end of everything. Setting up the meeting had gone relatively smoothly despite Kouyou’s obvious reservations about working with him.

“It wasn’t my idea to meet,” says Fukuzawa, fixing Mori with a steady look. “It was actually one of my artist’s, Atsushi. He feels that the ADA should form an alliance with Port Mafia Records in order to take down a mutual adversary of ours, The Guild.”

“Does he now?” asks Mori, smile growing even wider. “Is this about your idiotic fundraiser competition?”

“So you’re already up to date on the situation,” says Fukuzawa, not affected by Mori’s taunts.

“I was thoroughly amused when I’d heard you’d agreed to take on Francis in a financial contest,” says Mori, and his amusement is genuine this time. “I have no idea what possessed you to make such a foolish decision.”

“However,” continues Mori, dropping the amusement for his more calculating tone. “It’s not Port Mafia Records’ job to clean up the ADA’s messes. What would we have to gain by helping you?”

“That’s what I told them you’d say,” says Dazai lightly, smirking at Mori.

“Dazai,” acknowledges Mori, smirking back. “Still satisfied with your current employer?”

“More so than I ever was with my previous one,” fires back Dazai easily.

“If only that were true,” says Mori flippantly.

The words hit as they’re meant to. Dazai had forgotten what it was truly like to go toe to toe with Mori. It’s been so long since he’s had an exchange of this weight with someone.

“We’re getting off topic,” says Kunikida, surprising everyone. “Is Port Mafia Records interested in forming an alliance or not?”

“We don’t do hand outs,” says Kouyou, giving Kunikida a scornful look.

“Is that your answer then?” asks Fukuzawa, directing the question at Mori.

“I’m afraid so,” says Mori, not sounding the least bit sorry. “It was a pleasure to see you again though, Yukichi. You too, Osamu.”

Dazai doesn’t work for him anymore, so he’s technically allowed to react how he wants to. But he doesn’t want give Mori the satisfaction. So he smiles and waves as Mori walks away.

Kouyou doesn’t give any of them another look before following Mori, but Hirotsu nods at him as he turns to go. Dazai isn’t surprised he’d stayed quiet. He’d always been nothing but respectful in Mori’s presence.

“Well,” says Kunikida with a scowl once they’re alone, “That was a waste of time.”

Dazai sighs dramatically. “Oh, Kunikida. How I wish you were right.”

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### **Mid-August, Six Years, Six Months & Three Weeks Since the Release of Corruption**

Chuuya feels like he has been more than patient with everything that’s been thrown his way since March. He’d accomplished every task that had been given to him. He’d worked on an insane number of albums, gotten Kyouka to agree to do an album and then write a single, and attended what feels like thousands of meetings in Mori’s stead.

But when Mori takes off for two weeks at the end of July without any explanation, Chuuya’s patience comes to an end. Chuuya keeps things running smoothly at PMR while he’s gone,

but his anger grows every day he goes without hearing from him. Kouyou doesn't seem to know anything either.

Chuuya had even stooped low enough to ask Ace if he knew anything. Ace had given some bullshit smug reply that had just pissed Chuuya off even more.

Chuuya is in the middle of revising a song when Mori waltzes into his office calmly on the day he returns. Chuuya nearly snaps the pen he's holding in anger just at the sight of him.

"Where, exactly, have you been?" demands Chuuya without hesitation. Normally he would never been so flagrantly disrespectful to the boss, but he feels he has earned an explanation.

"Business trip," says Mori brightly, not put off by Chuuya's anger. He takes a seat in one of the chairs in front of Chuuya's desk. "I assume you kept everything running steadily in my absence?"

"Yes, I did," snaps Chuuya. "Although I got a little sick of people asking me where you were and not having an answer."

"I had something I had to take care of in person," says Mori simply.

"What is going on?" asks Chuuya, his anger shifting to frustration. "You meet with the ADA about doing that fundraiser bullshit, turn them down, and then disappear off the face of the planet."

"Oh," says Mori, starting to smirk. "We are definitely doing that fundraiser."

Chuuya is more confused than ever. "*Why?*"

"Before when the ADA asked, I told them we weren't going to do it if there was no benefit to Port Mafia Records," says Mori, smirk growing more pronounced. "But an optimal solution has presented itself. In this case, we will be making a payment upfront for a much larger return."

Chuuya still doesn't really get what he's talking about, but there's a more pressing issue at hand. He already has a creeping suspicion of what's going to happen. "When you say we're doing the fundraiser, who, specifically, are you referring to?"

The rules of the fundraising contest are fairly simple. The ADA has a phone number and a link people can use to donate to, and the Guild has a number and link as well. Ticket sales are going towards paying for the venue and the expenses of setting up the fundraiser. But those in the crowd are welcome to donate however much they'd like throughout the show. They're

also playing the fundraiser on multiple different television stations and websites. The competition starts when the fundraiser begins and goes until the last performer finishes.

Other than that, it's a free for all. Both record companies are free to use their allotted time however they wish. They've set no other rules.

Then at the end of the night, they'll tally the donations and one of them will walk about with one less artist.

By the time Dazai takes the stage, they're losing spectacularly. It isn't even close. They have a scoreboard to the side of the stage that updates automatically as donations come in. The audience thinks everything is a friendly competition for charity.

It's not that his coworkers haven't given entertaining performances. Kunikida had done an excellent job singing *The Hell of Mirrors* and *The Bamboo Gate*. Then Ranpo and the main songwriter for The Guild, Edgar Allen Poe, had done an amusing live songwriting competition, which Ranpo had won by a landslide.

But The Guild had Mark Twain sing his world famous song *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. Margaret Mitchell had given a soulful performance of *Gone With The Wind*. They'd given each of their acts a single song, and every new one brought a huge boost to The Guild's numbers. The last performance before Dazai's had been a surprising duet between John Steinbeck and Howard Phillips Lovecraft, they'd done an extremely well-done version of Lovecraft's classic *The Call of Cthulhu*.

It would take a miracle for them to catch up at this point.

Dazai is all smiles and cheer as he walks on stage though. The crowd applauds wildly as he gets to center stage. He plays *False Spring* first, and he ends up enjoying himself despite the high stakes situation. It's hard to stay angry when the audience is showering him with praise and singing along. Dazai tends to forget how much he enjoys performing until he's actually doing it.

There's an every growing sense of dread in the back of his mind though. Dazai pauses between songs to grab a quick drink of water.

"Thank you so much everyone," says Dazai graciously as people continue to cheer. "You're an excellent crowd. Let's get-."

Dazai is cut off by the blare of a guitar playing, and there's a hush over the room as the lights dim. The music grows as a spotlight shines on a platform slowly lowering towards the stage. A single figure stands on it. There are some gasps and whispers in the audience at the commotion.

"Hello, Los Angeles," says Chuuya Nakahara smoothly into his mic, fully coming into view. The lights turn back to normal as Chuuya gets close enough to the stage to hop off the platform with ease.

The gasps and whispers turn into screams as the audience realizes just who they're seeing. The noise is thunderous. Dazai almost winces at the sound.

Ah, there's his miracle. Right on schedule.

Dazai can't even begin to describe all the emotions he feels as Chuuya makes his way towards him, there's just too many. They haven't shared a stage since they were seventeen. Dazai has been mentally preparing himself for this moment since the second Atsushi mentioned an alliance with Port Mafia Records. All of his preparations feel woefully inadequate when faced with the sight of his ex-partner's smile as he takes in the still shrieking crowd.

"Sorry to interrupt," says Chuuya with a light shrug as he walks along the stage. His charisma on stage hasn't diminished at all. The crowd is eating out of the palm of his hand with just a few words. "My name is Chuuya Nakahara, for those of you who don't know me."

Dazai seriously doubts there's a single person here who doesn't know who he is. He resists the urge to roll his eyes. His pulse gets less steady with each step Chuuya takes towards him.

Chuuya isn't wearing a suit, but then he never had back when they'd played together. His outfit isn't the same style as he'd worn back then though either. The color scheme is different. His pants are dark blue leather paired with a simple (looking, not in price Dazai will bet) black t-shirt. Chuuya has left his hat behind, his hair flowing around him freely. His choker is the only thing that remains the same.

In other words, his outfit had been designed to match Dazai's own. Leave it to PMR to always think of something like that.

Dazai wonders if they'll still have to perform together if he vomits on the stage.

Blue eyes meet his as Chuuya comes to stand next to him, leaning to the side with one hand on his hip. Yup, extremely woefully inadequate.

"Hat rack," greets Dazai, flicking off his mic so no one else can hear them.

"Douchezai," says Chuuya, doing the same.

Dazai doesn't react by drawing on a lifetime of experiences with remaining blank faced. Chuuya's smile grows larger anyway. It's a stinging reminder how he remains the one person Dazai can never fool.

"It's been a little bit," says Chuuya, turning his mic back on. "But I used to be one half of a duo called Double Black."

The audience starts screaming again in earnest. Chuuya winks at them as he makes his way over to the piano. Dazai follows behind, feeling as if he's in some sort of terrible dream.

Chuuya adjusting his hands on the keys makes his heart clench. Everything feels way too familiar for how many years it's been. Dazai had tried to tell himself that this reunion was

necessary in order for them to defeat The Guild, but it's hard to remember that when Dazai is being exposed to this.

"Dazai and I haven't played together in a while though, so we'll have to go with something simple," says Chuuya. He runs through a few chords to get a feel for the piano, the notes coming out expertly.

Actually, Dazai keeps saying it's been years, but he's truthfully aware of exactly how long it's been. Their last performance had been the night of the Grammys five and a half years ago, a little over two thousand days. So it doesn't make sense why taking his place beside the piano next to Chuuya feels *right*.

Dazai has never regretted his decision to leave Port Mafia Records. He's glad to be out from under Mori's thumb. He genuinely likes his coworkers at the ADA, some of them he even considers to be more than coworkers. Despite Mori's goading, Dazai never plans to return to PMR.

But none of that seems to matter when Chuuya stops warming up and adjusts his position on the piano bench, clearing his throat.

"*Oh grantors of dark disgrace,*" sings Chuuya, in that way of his where his voice is soft yet firm. The crowd goes absolutely wild. Chuuya pauses naturally to let the cheering fade, not resisting a smile over the audience's enthusiasm. "*You need not wake me again.*"

Dazai had often wondered if his mind had exaggerated the sound of Chuuya's voice due to how he feels about him. But hearing it again in person is a stark reminder that he hadn't, Chuuya is just truly that remarkable. His voice has actually become even richer with time and experience. Hearing it in videos doesn't do it justice.

(Over two thousand days, and it's like they all evaporate after just two lines.)

Chuuya thunders on the keys then, all trace of softness gone. There isn't a song in existence that Dazai hates more than *Corruption*, but that doesn't stop the shivers he gets at how brilliant the song is removed from all the emotions.

*Look at this, it's my bone,*

*A tip of bone torn from its flesh, filthy, filled up with woes,*

*It's the days of our lives sticking out*

*Look at this, it's my heart,*

*A blackened thing, torn out and still beating*

*It's the thing humans can't live without*



For not playing the song live in over six years, Chuuya doesn't falter once. He's singing with everything he has, the lyrics coming out with a skill and grace that no cover of the song has ever managed to capture.

*You cannot escape gravity*

*It pulls us all down and apart*

*It rips away the gentlest souls*

*I fear I've been.....corrupted*

Chuuya sings the last word with its usual unnatural length. He starts the second verse with the slight jump in tempo, the growing sense of alarm.

Sometimes it strikes Dazai how the most impressive song he's ever heard had been written by someone who had been only sixteen. It hadn't seemed strange at the time, but now that he's a little older he can recognize how extraordinary that is.

*Look at this, it's my blood*

*A crimson river, dark and churning*

*But I think it's supposed to stay on the inside*

*Look at this, it's my mind*

*A hollow place, a boundless prison*

*But its tainted nature can not be denied*

*You cannot escape gravity*

*It pulls us all down and apart*

*It rips away the gentlest souls*

*I know I've been.....corrupted*

Chuuya lengthens the last word again, drawing it out as he lets the sound of the piano fade away completely. He pauses to let the anticipation grow.

Then he starts the solo with tenacity, striking the keys in a complex flow of notes that covers of the song don't even try to capture. He switches tempo and key constantly, never fixing on a rhythm or pattern for more than a couple seconds.

Dazai feels breathless as he watches from beside him. He's still never met anyone else who can play like this. Going without hearing it for this many years had completely wiped his tolerance for how affected he is by the song. Every note feels like a knife and a benediction simultaneously.

Dazai lets it go on longer than he ever has before.

Because Dazai is an expert liar, but he can't lie to himself when he's watching the person who'd defined what music meant to Dazai playing right in front of him. He's tried to pretend that he's just as satisfied being a solo artist as he'd been being a duo. He'd maintained that he didn't *need* Chuuya to make music, he could do it just fine on his own.

Dazai had told himself he was dreading playing with Chuuya again after all these years. It hadn't been a complete lie. But in the back of his mind he'd known he'd craved it far more.

He had never felt as *alive* as he does right now during any of his performances alone. Something had always been missing. And Dazai had tried to explain it away and justify it a million times, to hide from the obvious fact: music truly doesn't feel like music if Chuuya isn't there beside him.

Chuuya's fingers start to strain as he continues to hammer on the keys, but he keeps playing. The sound is starting to become even more disorganized. It's unsettling, and Dazai never wants it to end.

But it has to, so he places a slightly less than steady hand against Chuuya's shoulder to cut him off. Dazai hadn't expected him to recoil away from him, Chuuya is too much of a professional for that. Nothing had prepared Dazai for the agony of Chuuya *leaning into* his touch. He brings his hand back as if he'd been burned.

Dazai needs to get the hell off this stage.

"*What does it mean to be human?*" sings Dazai, pouring everything he has into the song while Chuuya plays the softer bridge notes. He can't give less than his all when he's singing with Chuuya. "*I'll make you be human. You're no longer human, no longer human. Wake up.*"

Dazai makes the mistake of looking Chuuya in the eyes then, Chuuya looking right back. It feels like something inside of him breaks. Dazai can't look away though as they sing the next lines back and forth.

*You cannot escape gravity (what does it mean to be human)*

*It pulls us down (I'll make you be human) and apart*

*It rips away the gentlest souls (You're no longer human, no longer human)*

*I think it's time to.....wake up*

They only sing a single line together in the whole song, and that one harmony sounds better than any other Dazai has ever heard. He can't decide if it's better or worse when Chuuya finally looks away to play the outro, shifting to a softer and cleaner style.

*Oh grantors of dark disgrace*

*I fear I've woken again*

Dazai has never heard an audience scream this loud before. It's practically deafening. One glance to the scoreboard confirms that they've already caught up to The Guild and seem to be on their way to shooting past them.

Dazai's smile is the fakest expression he's ever given as he faces the crowd. This is quite possibly the worst thing that has ever happened to him.

Chuuya had really only intended to play one song with Dazai. That had been the plan. Get in, play *Corruption*, and get the fuck out without lingering.

But then Chuuya is on stage, taking in the thunderous applause. It's infectious. Chuuya hasn't played for a real crowd in way too fucking long. He's filled with adrenaline. He smiles despite all the conflicting emotions he's feeling.

There had been a part of Chuuya that had wondered if they wouldn't fit together the same after not playing a single song together for that many years. But it had all come back in an instant.

Chuuya has just as many conflicting feelings about *Corruption* as he does about Dazai, but he'd meant what he'd said to Kyouka. Playing music that you had created, that means something to you, makes everything feel so much sharper. The good and the bad.

Chuuya chooses to focus on the good, the bad can wait until later. He smirks at the crowd, standing up from the piano bench and walking around it to stand next to Dazai. Dazai is smiling as well, but there's an edge of something to it.

"You guys are too fucking kind," says Chuuya, speaking over the yelling and shaking his head. He directs his smirk towards Dazai then. "How about we do one more song?"

The audience's response is overwhelming enthusiastic. Dazai gives him an incredulous look for a split second before recovering and smiling again.

Chuuya would like to pretend that the suggestion is purely professional. Mori had made it clear that the ADA needed to be the winner of this fundraiser for whatever reason, and Double Black is certain to bring in heaps of donations. They already have based on the scoreboard where the ADA's numbers keep rising steadily.

But Chuuya's motivations are personal. He knows this is probably the last time he and Dazai are ever going to sing together. This time, he's not having them go out on fucking *Corruption*. He's going to play one more song with him. If this is the end of Double Black, they're going out on a high note, even if it aches horrifically.

"Fine, I'll allow Chuuya to hog my stage time," says Dazai flippantly. The crowd laughs at him, thinking this is classic Double Black banter. They don't hear the undercurrent of malice in the words. "What are we going to play?"

"How about something new?" suggests Chuuya breezily, playing his part in this charade of partnership.

"I know that I've always been the brains of this operation," says Dazai, rolling his eyes, "But we don't *have* any new music."

Chuuya keeps his temper in check, but his nails are cutting into his palms with how tightly he's clenching his fists. He ignores Dazai and goes to pick up one of the acoustic guitars from the side of the stage, slipping underneath the strap.

Dazai is watching him carefully, trying to understand what he's thinking. Chuuya is a little smug that he can still keep him on his toes. He'd always hated when Dazai had called him predictable.

Chuuya plays the opening of the song he settles on, strumming the guitar easily. The notes come out light and gentle. The original version is with a piano and a full band, but Chuuya wants a break from the keys after *Corruption*. Plus he'd always felt the song would flow better with a simpler sound.

"Here's *Play Me a Song*," says Chuuya, announcing his choice to Dazai as much as the crowd.

They're here for a fucking fundraiser, right? Chuuya can't think of a single song that'll draw in more money than Double Black doing a duet of Dazai's stupid love song. There's the admission that he knows the song this well with his choice, but he gets a much bigger thrill out of how much the song he'd picked is pissing Dazai off. His outward appearance hasn't changed at all, but Chuuya can tell he's furious.

"*Play me a song,*" sings Chuuya earnestly, "*Oh play it soft and sweet.*" It's a slightly slower tempo than Dazai's version, and the guitar gives it a more personal tone. He sings the words less crisply than Dazai would, letting them flow together more.

"*Play me a song,*" jumps in Dazai on the next line, matching Chuuya's pace and energy easily. It makes his stomach dip a little how in sync they are without discussing anything. Music isn't like this with anyone else. "*Not for everyone- just me.*"

"*They say that you can't lie,*" Chuuya draws out the last word in a long, full note, "*In a song.*"

Dazai's eyes can't hide how he feels about Chuuya's version of the song, Chuuya knows he approves. It's the look he reserves for when Chuuya gets the music *right*. Chuuya could never forget it, not after how hard he'd always worked to try and receive it.

Chuuya's lips turn up with just the hint of a smirk as they sing the last lines of the first verse together, voices blending seamlessly as per usual. "*So please, play me a song.*"

When all is said and done, the ADA creams The Guild in the fundraiser. The Guild had put up a good showing after Double Black's performance, Lucy had done a hauntingly beautiful rendition of *Anne of Abyssal Red*, and even Francis himself had taken to stage to play his most popular song *The Great Gatsby*.

But they just couldn't regain the ground they'd lost. Especially not when Akutagawa had stormed onto the stage to demand Atsushi Nakajima perform *Rashomon* with him. Chuuya hadn't even known he was coming, he's supposed to still be on tour. But he and Atsushi had been a surprisingly good combination, Ryuunosuke had played the piano while Atsushi sang (although Akutagawa had spent the entire song glaring daggers at him.)

The final nail in the coffin had been when they'd finished though and Kyouka had walked on stage, the place had exploded. She'd brought down the house with *Demon Snow*. Chuuya had been insanely proud of her.

When Mori put his mind to something, there isn't a force in the universe that could stop him. He'd made the declaration that they would help the ADA win this competition, and so they had.

Chuuya still doesn't have the details of *why* they'd decided to help the ADA, but it had been a direct request from Mori. Chuuya hadn't had time to get an answer out of him, not when he'd been told he'd have to play with Dazai again. It had taken all of Chuuya's energy to try and confront that predicament.

Chuuya is backstage now, looking for Akutagawa so he can congratulate him. And get the fuck out of here. Now that he's come down from the high of playing all of his negative thoughts and emotions are starting to settle in. Chuuya feels like a powder keg, ready to snap.

It's both surprising and not at all surprising that he runs into Dazai. He's drinking a bottle of water, and his eyes narrow as he notices Chuuya.

"Oi, chibi," says Dazai, voice instantly grating. "This is a private area, we don't allow dogs back here."

"Shut the fuck up," says Chuuya, rolling his eyes. "I'm looking for Akutagawa."

Chuuya starts to walk away but Dazai speaks up before he gets more than a couple steps.

"So what made you change your mind?" Dazai's voice is falsely innocent.

Chuuya turns around to glare at him. "What are you talking about now?"

"You swore you'd never sing a love song with me," says Dazai brightly. "Yet *Play Me a Song* is definitely a love song."

"*You're* talking to me about breaking promises?" asks Chuuya, letting out a harsh laugh.

"Did my musical talent make you cave?" asks Dazai smugly. "Were you so dazzled by my song that you just had to sing it? I'm so flattered." He raises a hand to his chest mockingly.

"Please," sneers Chuuya. "You wish."

"I suppose we could have played something from *your* solo album," says Dazai flippantly. "Oh, wait, you don't have one!" He smirks and shakes his head. "Mori must be so disappointed, all that effort wasted on you since you were fifteen, and you never return on the investment."

The powder keg explodes.

Chuuya had sworn to himself that he wouldn't let Dazai get to him this time. But that notion crumples with the amount of hatred Chuuya is feeling right now.

"Because your music is something to be proud of?" asks Chuuya, voice dripping in contempt. "What the fuck even was that song we just sang? It's literally just sentimental crap. Are you *ever* going to grow out of being boring and predictable?"

Dazai's face goes completely blank, but Chuuya isn't done. He can't hold back the words as they come out, he's got *years* of resentment fueling them.

"I mean, there's a reason Mori put *me* in charge creatively of our album all those years ago," says Chuuya, shrugging with a cruel smirk. "He could already see then that the music you write really isn't worth anything. There's just something missing."

"And you think *you're* somehow above me?" asks Dazai mockingly. Chuuya has never seen him this blatantly angry before. He's left his calm facade behind to give Chuuya a look filled with venom. "You haven't even truly written a song since you were sixteen and I was there to babysit you." Dazai laughs derisively. "You're a *musician* who's terrified of *music*. I literally can't think of anything more pathetic."

Chuuya feels every word like a blow to the gut. His hands start to tremble at his sides. Dazai keeps going though, smile only growing as he sees Chuuya's anger.

"I don't even know if you deserve to be called a musician at this point," says Dazai, smirking condescendingly. "How does it feel to be an absolute failure?"

Chuuya is too enraged to speak. But someone else cuts in, surprising them both.

"That's *enough*," says Kouyou. Chuuya hadn't even known she was here. Her expression is downright murderous, looking at Dazai as if the force of her glare could harm him directly.

"Would it kill you for *once*, Ozaki, to stay out of other people's business?" asks Dazai, giving her a glare of his own.

"Don't fucking talk to her like that," says Chuuya sharply, pointing a warning finger at him. He shakes his head. "Let's go, Kouyou."

"Running away?" asks Dazai lightly, raising an eyebrow. "Typical."

"I fucking *hate* you," says Chuuya, and he's never meant it more.

"Back 'atcha, partner," says Dazai with a wide smile.

Chuuya doesn't sleep the night after the fundraiser. He'd been too keyed up. He'd gone straight to the ocean the second he'd left, turning off his phone and lying down in the sand.

He'd spent the night replaying Dazai's words, his mom's words, Mori's, Kouyou's, a thousand moments. He feels like absolute shit the next day, but he goes into the office anyway.

Chuuya is guzzling tea to try and stay awake as he walks through the doors. He walks straight towards the executive suite. When he'd turned on his phone he'd had a text from Mori calling an executive meeting first thing today. Maybe Chuuya will finally get some answers to why he had to go through that absolute clusterfuck last night.

Chuuya doesn't know what he had been expecting to walk into, but it had not been Mori, Kouyou, and Ace laughing and drinking wine.

"Chuuya," says Mori brightly. His cheer doesn't seem like an act for once. He hands him a glass of wine. Chuuya sees the bottle, a Romanée-Conti.

Chuuya stares at the expensive wine in confusion. He may be running on zero sleep, but that doesn't explain the situation. "What's going on?"

"We're celebrating our victory, Chuuya," says Mori. He grin is huge.

"Because the ADA won that ridiculous fundraising contest?" asks Chuuya, raising his eyebrows. He takes a sip of his wine, confusion did not mean he was going to pass up good wine.

"No," says Mori, shaking his head. "We're celebrating the newest acquisition of Port Mafia Records."

He passes Chuuya a document. Chuuya reads the first few lines, almost dropping his wine.

"Is this real?" asks Chuuya, looking around the room. Ace and Kouyou's grins are equally as large as Mori's.

"The deal was finalized this morning," says Mori smugly. "Port Mafia Records is now the parent company of The Guild."

"What the fuck?" asks Chuuya, not able to help himself. The others all laugh at his outburst.

"Apparently Francis has been struggling financially for some time," says Kouyou merrily. "He's been pouring all of his money into caring for his daughter, trying every investigational treatment there is, and paying large sums to do it."

"Then when he ran out of money," adds Ace, his smugness matching the others' for once, "He started dipping into The Guild's."

"The upper management has been rather put out with his antics for a while now," says Mori, crossing his arms. "Francis tried to placate them by proving he could grow new artists to make up for his losses. That's why he came to us to try and help him find someone. He'd borrowed the money to make us the offer, digging an even bigger hole for himself."

"He'd managed to score a victory with that Lucy girl," says Kouyou. "She's a penniless orphan from Canada, and the sales from *Anne of Abyssal Red* kept things afloat for a bit."

"Francis's final error was pouring so much of The Guild's money into that ludicrous fundraiser," says Mori, shaking his head. "He finally burned his last bridge. I had to go out to



Long Island to meet with the executives of The Guild to finalize the details of the agreement in person.”

Things are starting to fall into place. Chuuya still has questions though.

“Can we afford to buy The Guild?” asks Chuuya. Francis might be broke, but the company as a whole isn’t. He can’t imagine the amount of money it would take to purchase it.

“It did take some time to figure out things on the financial end,” says Mori with a nod. “Amassing a sum that large wasn’t easy. But with the sales we’ve produced since March and moving some things around, we pulled it off.”

Chuuya’s eyebrows raise, realizing just how long Mori had been planning this.

“The boost in sales we’re going to get from last night help too,” says Ace. He flicks his blonde hair.

Chuuya starts laughing then, the sound a little wild. “You *bought* The Guild.”

“I told you I would handle it,” says Mori simply. He smiles lightly. “I couldn’t have pulled it off without your assistance. Every single one of you.”

“A toast,” proposes Kouyou, raising her glass. “To Port Mafia Records.”

“To Port Mafia Records,” they all echo, lifting their glasses and drinking.

“Francis and Fukuzawa made that arrangement where the winner of the fundraiser got to have one of the artists from the loser,” says Mori, leaning back in his chair. “Obviously, now that we own The Guild, we don’t owe them anything. But I’m giving them Kyouka. It’s a small loss when we just gained every artist under The Guild.” Mori shrugs. “Plus it takes too much effort to get quality music out of resisting artists. Fukuzawa can have her, and we can put all of this behind us for good.”

Chuuya looks over at Kouyou, who’s trying not to smile. It’s clear she had a hand in this. Chuuya is a little disappointed Kyouka is leaving, but he automatically knows her decision is motivated by things beyond music and record labels.

“Putting everything behind us sounds nice,” says Chuuya. Even though he knows he’s not going to be moving on from what had happened last night any time in the near future, if ever.

Chuuya tells Mori flat out that he’s taking some time off at the end of their meeting. Mori agrees easily, telling Chuuya he’d earned it. Chuuya doesn’t bother with false modesty, he

fucking had earned it.

He stops by his office to check if there's anything he needs. But he's surprised to find someone waiting for him there.

"What are you doing here, Kyouka?" asks Chuuya. He didn't think she would stick around after breaking her record deal and signing with the ADA.

Chuuya gets his second big shock of the morning when she bursts into tears.

His eyes widen in horror. She's been a little more open since they'd gotten closer, but he'd never seen her *cry* before. He quickly crosses the room to stand in front of her and crouch a little so that they're face to face.

"Hey," he says softly. "Hey. What's wrong?"

"Do you hate me now?" asks Kyouka, the words extremely shaky.

"No," says Chuuya immediately, shaking his head fervently. "No, of course not."

"You did so much for me," says Kyouka, trying to wipe her eyes but the tears keep pouring out. "And it was all a waste of time."

"I don't think that," says Chuuya, raising his voice a little to get her to really listen. "Do you?"

"No," says Kyouka, choking on a sob. She hugs her arms around herself, giving Chuuya a despondent look. "Can we...can we still be friends?"

"Of course we're still going to be friends," says Chuuya, pulling her arms down so he can take her hands in his and squeeze them. "You're not getting rid of me that easily."

"But Dazai left for the ADA, and you hate him so much," says Kyouka while sniffing.

"That's very, very different," says Chuuya gravely. He swallows around a lump in his throat. "Is working for the ADA what you want?"

"Yes," says Kyouka quietly. "They...they let their younger artists work part-time. They get to go to school."

"Then that's what I want for you," says Chuuya simply. "We might be professional rivals now technically, but if you ever decide to put out an album I will be first in line to listen to it. Or whatever you end up deciding to do, I know you're going to knock it out of the park."

Kyouka pulls him into a hug then, almost knocking him off his feet in his crouched position. She squeezes him tightly.

Chuuya smiles, hugging her back. He truly does hope this ends up making her happier. He holds no love for the ADA, but he holds a great deal of it for Kyouka.

There may have been a time when he'd been younger where he would have taken her leaving PMR as a betrayal. But he can't keep complaining about people leaving him then push someone away who so clearly wants to stay. Music is messy, and so is life. He wants to hold onto the people he cares about regardless of if they work for the same company.

"Do you think Elise will hate me?" asks Kyouka worriedly as she pulls away.

Chuuya laughs and ruffles her hair. "If anyone will get your desire to go to high school, it's going to be Elise. Trust me. She'll still be your friend too."

Kyouka smiles at him, still sniffing but the tears seem to be stopping now thankfully.

"You shoot me a text any time you want," says Chuuya with a grin, "And I'll come pick you up in one of PMR's illustrious vans and we'll go get ice cream."

Kyouka chuckles a little, shaking her head. "Sounds good," she replies, just the slightest tremble to her voice.

"Now get out of here," says Chuuya gently. "Those dorks at the ADA are probably dying to see you."

Kyouka pulls him into another tight hug, although this one is much quicker. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," says Chuuya sincerely.

Kyouka looks more like herself now, flashing Chuuya one last small smile as she turns to go. "I'll see you soon?"

"Later," says Chuuya to her retreating form.

Once he's alone, Chuuya lets out a long sigh. Dear fucking god he's exhausted. He isn't going to even *think* about work until September. He is taking this break and not answering a single work-related question.

Chuuya brings his phone out, dialing Tachihara's number and sticking it in his between his shoulder and his ear while he digs through his desk for the stuff he needs. "Hey, how do you feel about taking that fucking beach vacation now?"

## Chapter End Notes

i'm sure no one will be surprised i clowned myself into thinking this chapter was going to be like 30k. then...kyouka became a tagged character. NO REGRETS though

i do laugh when people commend me on writing such long chapters. because writing the long chapters is easy peasy lemon squeezey. it's the editing that gets me. dear god, the editing.

Notes! Get your notes and facts here!!

- “Whoever is first in the field and awaits the coming of the enemy, will be fresh for the fight; whoever is second in the field and has to hasten to battle will arrive exhausted.” -Sun Tzu, The Art of War
- i couldn't find a name of the man who'd run Atsushi's orphanage, so i named him Nick Carraway after the narrator of The Great Gatsby by F. Scott Fitzgerald.
- Francis is an absolute delight to write. what a magnificent bastard
- using the real life authors' birthdays has worked out surprisingly well in this story
- “A man will have rank only by dint of his talents, virtues, and accomplishments”  
RL Fukuzawa
- fun fact, there are indeed stationary stores in LA
- “...there are older people, teachers for example, of whom it is insufficient merely to say that they are unforgettable. People who have helped you in some significant way, I mean. You have to admit that these people are worthy to be remembered. Since they have sworn no oath of duty or affection for you, they have no obligation to you. You are just a stranger to them, and even when, by the very nature of things, you have forgotten them, it does not mean that you are lacking in affection or sense of obligation. However, there are some people in this world that you can just never forget.” -Doppo Kunikida, River Mist & Other Stories, name adapted to Mist on the River
- Arthur Conan Doyle, author of Sherlock Holmes, picked as a singer of one of Ranpo's songs due to them both writing detective stories
- have i mentioned lately how much i love the black lizards?? because i do so much. kajii is back with them for good now!
- higuchi is that one friend in the group who everyone messes with (maple leafs are on the Canadian flag if anyone wasn't aware, and hoser is a Canadian insult)
- rapiers are the longest types of sword in case that metaphor was confusing
- RL Atsushi published a book about the life of Robert Louis Stevenson called Light, Wind and Dreams
- you can also pry Elise & Kyouka's friendship from my cold dead hands
- Poèmes saturniens is a collection of poetry by Paul Verlaine
- me seven chapters later: hmm, maybe i'll write out the chorus for *Golden Demon*
- *Twilight* is of course based on the paranormal vampire romance book of the same name by Stephanie Meyer that was wildly popular with teenage girls (if you never had a twilight phase, please ignore my self-indulgent fun with that section)
- RL Kyouka got into literature because of his mother
- i had not know a crepe place was called a crêperie until writing this chapter
- RL Kyouka wrote kabuki plays, so Kyouka's favorite song is a kabuki play by one of the most famous Japanese kabuki playwrights
- Beast Beneath the Moonlight is based on RL Atsushi's The Moon Over the Mountain (for which his ability is named), which is based on the Tang Dynasty legend “Tiger Man”. the lyrics are a direct quote from it!
- “Know your enemy and know yourself, find naught in fear for 100 battles. Know yourself but not your enemy, find level of loss and victory. Know not thy enemy nor yourself, wallow in defeat every time.” -Sun Tzu, The Art of War
- i know very little about the world of the law surrounding record deals, so i am bending their rules for my own purposes \*shrugs\*

- RL Lucy was Canadian, as she is here. I choose her ability name as her song title because...it just sound so cool. "My life is a perfect graveyard of buried hopes." - LMM, Anne of Green Gables
- dazai: there is no way this could possibly get any worse, chuuya: let's sing an intimate duet of the love song you wrote about meeeeeee (even though i don't know that), dazai: it appears i was wrong

this chapter was so different than the last, way more plot heavy. hopefully i was able to do the 3 organizations conflict some musician AU justice. it is a bit fantastical, but murder and music are sometimes hard to meld

i can't say how soon i'll be able to update, just know i'm doing my best. also, this is the last chapter that takes place fully in the past (¬\_¬ )

superstar reader omnomnomnom asked me a couple chapters ago if we had reached the angst peak, i told them i'd let them know when we had. this is our mountain top.

comments mean the world to me, any and all are so dearly appreciated if you don't mind sharing what you thought!

# If You Wanted A Song Written About You, All You Had to Do Was Ask

## Chapter Summary

a stalemate only lasts as long as both parties remain immobile

## Chapter Notes

\*finger guns\* y'all remember me??

i am Not Proud of how long this update took. but it was kind of necessary what with my schedule, needing a bit of a break, and the complexity of this chapter. but i am still sorry!! i appreciate everyone's patience so much

and i'm still just dumbfounded at the support i get. the kudos?? comments?? art?!? the kindness overwhelms me

an actual sentence i said to myself: do you think people are going to be disappointed because it's only 29k? (this fic has ruined me)

do i even have to say anymore that the chapter title is based on the mayday parade song of the same name or do you just assume that?

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

## Early September, Four Months and Three Weeks Until the Release of Arahabaki

Chuuya understands that a lot of people probably like the crystalline clear water and pristine white sand beaches at the resort he and Tachihara are staying at. But frankly, Chuuya finds it a little bit creepy and greatly prefers the beaches in L.A. where the water looks normal and the beach looks lived in. He can't believe it's someone's actual job here to rake the sand to make it look perfect every morning.

The all-inclusive resort on the Gulf of Mexico makes up for any beach deficits in privacy though. He and Tachihara have just been treated like normal guests, there hasn't been any fuss. The other guests have kept to themselves as well. It's been the most relaxing trip Chuuya has probably had in his entire life.

Or it would be, if Chuuya could fully relax. But no matter what he does he can't get the words *how does it feel to be an absolute failure?* out of his head.

He *should* be celebrating. After endless months of working himself to the brink Port Mafia Records had come out on top resoundingly. They'd picked up a slew of talented new artists by acquiring The Guild. They'd seemingly made peace with the ADA. Any lingering doubts about PMR's reputation in the music industry had been squashed. Chuuya should be ecstatic.

Instead, he's even more on edge than he'd been before. Despite the professional victory, Chuuya feels...unsettled. He's angry, obviously, but that's typical, especially when it came to dealing with Dazai. Dazai being an asshole is something he'd expected. Anger didn't even begin to cover the spectrum of emotions Chuuya is feeling though.

Performing together had been something like out of a dream, or a memory rather. Chuuya has played many shows without Dazai, played with so many other people all over the world. He'd always loved playing music live, it's always made him feel incredible despite anything else going on.

It isn't that he'd forgotten how different it was singing with Dazai, it was more that he'd forced himself not to dwell on it. It had been painful, wishing for something he couldn't have, even back when he was playing with The Black Lizards and he'd thought their separation was only temporary. Then after Dazai had left he'd tried to push all those moments on stage behind him, to move towards the future.

Then he'd played *Corruption* again for the first time live in over five years and Dazai had sang *What does it mean to be human? I'll make you be human* while looking him in the eyes, and Chuuya had been brutally reminded why he'd never really even fell a little bit out of love with him. To be known, to be understood, it's a heady thing. Chuuya hadn't been able to look away.

Naturally, things had turned to shit shortly after that, as things involving Dazai tended to. Perhaps Chuuya should have expected Dazai to be angry after the stunt Chuuya had pulled with the duet of *Play Me a Song*, the choice had been slightly vindictive.

But their fight after the fundraiser had been different, Chuuya had felt out of control with the things he'd said. He didn't even really mean them, or he did but not exactly in the way that he'd said them. He *does* think Dazai's music could be different, better really, but that's because he thinks Dazai is capable of masterpieces but refuses to put in the effort.

Dazai's taunts had felt like he'd found Chuuya's Achilles' heel, torn it wide open and then spit in the wound gleefully. Chuuya remembers his rage after their argument last March, how he'd burned with anger. This time it isn't the anger that's keeping him in this state of unease, it's the lingering sense of doubt.

Chuuya just keeps coming back to the question: what if Dazai was right?

He's grateful that Tachihara is here with him. Michizou hadn't questioned Chuuya's request to go on a spontaneous vacation, despite being in the middle of recording an album. He'd agreed right away and hadn't brought up the reason they were there once. He'd embraced their vacation wholeheartedly, content to laze around on the beach and drink the frozen cocktails the staff walked around offering.

Tachihara's presence has helped keep him from getting too melancholic. His form of support has always been subtle but persistent, and Chuuya doesn't even know how to begin to thank him for it. It's hard to not enjoy himself when he's lounging on a beach chair with one of his best friends, the sun and the sea (despite its color) in front of them.

Tachihara lets out a content sigh beside him from his own lounge chair. He's gained a slight tan over the past two weeks, his skin just a bit darker. Chuuya is the same color as always, his skin only burns if he doesn't wear copious amounts of sunscreen. Despite also having red hair, the same doesn't seem to apply to Tachihara.

"I love it here," declares Tachihara, turning to face Chuuya with a lazy smile. "If Gin wouldn't track me down and murder me for it, I would totally stay here forever."

"I'm surprised she didn't want to come too," says Chuuya with a slight laugh.

Gin loves the beach, almost as much as Chuuya does. He'd been slightly surprised when Tachihara had shown up at the airport alone. He hasn't seen Tachihara use his phone much either while they've been here. Chuuya's phone has remained off for the entire trip, he'd meant what he'd said about taking a real break. He figures if Mori had a problem with it he'd find a way to get in contact with him.

"I didn't ask her to," says Tachihara, the lighthearted tone of the conversation slipping away. There were few places Tachihara had gone in years where Gin hadn't received an invitation. His smile dims a bit, and he fixes Chuuya with a more serious look. "You know, I've given you plenty of time to bring it up, but today is our last day here."

"To bring up what?" asks Chuuya, voice a little short. He'd been appreciating not having to talk about things, he hadn't wanted it to end so soon. Although he probably should have expected this, Tachihara isn't one to avoid confrontation, not indefinitely.

"I'm not going to force you to talk about anything," says Tachihara with a sigh. He sounds more disappointed than angry, which makes Chuuya feel guilty. "But bottling shit up never helps anything."

Chuuya frowns, crossing his arms and looking out at the too blue ocean. Tachihara has a point, and he's someone Chuuya knows he can trust to give him an honest answer.

"When you think of me, do you think of me as a musician or as an executive?" asks Chuuya, keeping his gaze fixed straight ahead.

"I mean, aren't you both?" asks Tachihara, sounding confused. This clearly isn't the direction he'd thought the conversation would be going.

"Which one do you think of me as more?" asks Chuuya, annoyance seeping into his voice outside of his control. He turns to see Tachihara's expression.

"Neither, really," says Tachihara, seeming to catch on to how invested Chuuya is in his response. He pauses, thinking over his answer. "But I guess an executive lately with how crazy busy you've been. You're always working *on* music though."



Chuuya hums in acknowledgment of the answer, biting his lip and looking away again. It hadn't helped to ease any of his uncertainty. If anything it had made it worse, despite Tachihara's good intentions.

"Why does it matter?" asks Tachihara, his voice curious and a little disapproving.

Chuuya laughs without any humor. "Sometimes I think that if seventeen year old me could see me now he'd be disgusted," he says with a sigh.

"When I was seventeen, I was still living with my parents and they had me convinced being a drummer was a pipe dream and that I should be focused on going to college so I could become successful like my brother," says Tachihara, his voice that strange tone it is whenever he talks about his parents, frustrated but hesitant to say anything against them. "I don't put much stock in my past self's opinions. You shouldn't either."

"I do want to put the past behind me," says Chuuya, running a hand through his hair in frustration. "It keeps coming back to fuck with me though."

Tachihara is quiet for a moment, and Chuuya thinks they've dropped the subject. Then he surprises Chuuya by saying, "I respect you a lot, you know."

"You what?" asks Chuuya, more than a little bewildered.

"I respect you," repeats Tachihara simply. "I mean, we work for Port Mafia Records, we're surrounded by the best of the best. But the music you make, whether you're playing or writing or producing, it's something else." He shrugs, smiling at Chuuya. "It's why I wasn't mad when you left The Black Lizards. You'd have been wasted in the background with us."

Chuuya takes in the unexpected praise, absurdly touched. Tachihara didn't give complements lightly, and he wouldn't give one just to make him feel better. Chuuya feels content in a way he hasn't since he'd gotten off the stage at that stupid fundraiser.

Chuuya's grin is huge. "Ewwww," he says, tone full of mocking.

"Shut up," says Tachihara, crossing his arms and looking away. He's smiling too though.

"Thank you," says Chuuya seriously. "If I were more selfish, I would make you be the drummer for every song I work on."

"That's way grosser than what I just said," says Tachihara smugly, smirking at him.

Chuuya rolls his eyes, the smile doesn't leave his face though. He goes back to looking at the ocean, the color still as obnoxious but Chuuya is trying to be less of a snob about it.

"Thanks for coming with me here," says Chuuya. "I know it was kind of sudden, and you're in the middle of an album."

"Eh, it's fine," says Tachihara mildly. "I did tell you to let people be there for you when you're going off the rails. Plus I got a beach vacation out of your melodrama. Though Gin keeps texting me and complaining how I abandoned her with Kajii and Higuchi."

Chuuya laughs. Higuchi and Kajii might get along even worse than he and the Lemon Fucker had back in the day. “You could have asked her to come.”

“Some trips are just for the bros,” says Tachihara obnoxiously, before adding more seriously, “And I know how private you are when it comes to your shit.”

“Stop being so nice to me,” says Chuuya, glaring at Tachihara and trying to fight off a smile. “You’re freaking me out.”

“No,” says Tachihara petulantly. He grins widely.

“Fuck off,” says Chuuya, though he can’t hold back his laughter now.

Tachihara sits up in his chair, pointing to something. “Oooh, drink man! Mystery frozen cocktail?”

Chuuya looks where he’s pointing to see one of the resort workers holding a tray of frozen drinks, walking around and offering them to the guests. “Hell yeah,” he says easily.

Tachihara gives him a thumbs up and jogs over towards the man.

Chuuya watches him go, his smile slipping a little as he does. He’d earned Tachihara’s respect, something he values greatly.

Chuuya is less sure if he’s earned his own.

Dazai is lying on the couch in the break area of the ADA office and staring at the ceiling, a position he’s found himself in more and more lately. He’d used to find the blank white tiles calming. They don’t seem to work as well as they had before.

Then again, Dazai hadn’t been as troubled previously. His worries had been mostly about the ADA and Atsushi, in finding a way to keep everything together. And they’d done it. Atsushi’s future with the ADA is secure, they’d smoothed things over with PMR, and even picked up Kyouka Izumi somehow.

They’d won, yet Dazai found no spoils in the victory.

He’s pleased about how things turned out for the ADA of course. Dazai hadn’t envisioned just how successfully they’d come out of the conflict of the past months with The Guild and PMR. His coworkers are all overjoyed.

Dazai is too, on some level. Watching the tension in the office slip away these past couple weeks has been refreshing. Kunikida had finally packed up the war room table from the center of the office, though Ranpo had pouted about losing his favorite place to snack. Atsushi in particular is bursting with happiness, partially about himself but probably also about the addition of Kyouka.

Dazai hasn't spent much time with the girl. She's only in the office after school. Kenji had been disappointed to learn they wouldn't be going to the same one. Kyouka is attending a private school in L.A. that Dazai thinks Kouyou had a hand in choosing. She always came to the ADA still in uniform.

Kyouka is quiet, although everyone has warmed up to her quickly. Well, everyone excluding himself. Dazai hadn't exactly decided to avoid her, but he hadn't sought her out really. The avoidance seems to be mutual. Dazai thinks their similar backgrounds have both made them wary of the other.

Things have slowly shifted towards how they were before Francis had strolled into the office that day in April. Ranpo is back to writing songs at a truly alarming pace, now more in demand than before after beating Edgar Allen Poe on stage. Though he and Poe had someone come out of the encounter as friends. He and his raccoon have made multiple trips to the ADA.

Though Poe technically works for PMR rather than The Guild now. Dazai had been thoroughly amused, impressed, and annoyed when he'd learned that Mori had *bought* The Guild. Dazai somehow continues to underestimate him. He really wishes he could be free to hate him in peace without having to respect him.

Yosano had gone back to her true love of editing, though she did still expect Atsushi to follow her directions on proper star behavior (she reminds Dazai just a bit of The Count sometimes, not that he'd ever tell her that.) She's also tried to take Kyouka under wing, excited to have another girl performer among them.

Tanizaki had given up playing errand boy to go back to working on Light Snow, much to his great relief. Kunikida has spent most of his time working with him on it. They're set to start recording soon, aiming to release later this year. One perk of this conflict is that the ADA now knows how to get music out much faster, although the pace is much less frantic.

Dazai has been helping Atsushi with getting started on his own album. Atsushi has been extremely eager. Despite there not being a pressing need for him to put out music like before, his enthusiasm seems to have grown. Dazai wonders if it has anything to do with Atsushi's encounter with Ryuunosuke Akutagawa, though he hasn't asked. Atsushi gets very twitchy whenever the other boy is brought up.

But while the tension has drained from his coworkers since the fundraiser, Dazai's had only escalated. Chuuya Nakahara tended to have that effect on him.

It had been bad enough performing *Corruption* with him, but Dazai had at least anticipated that. Then Chuuya had forced him into singing a duet of *Play Me a Song*, the song that Dazai

had written about...It had been worse than a slap in the face. It had been derisive, like a mockery of the song and what it meant.

When Dazai had seen him backstage, he hadn't been able to stop himself from lashing out, from trying to make Chuuya feel just a sliver as terrible as Dazai did. It had backfired horrendously. Instead of getting under Chuuya's skin, Chuuya had gotten under his own.

It's not enough that Chuuya had belittled his music, but then he had brought up Mori putting him in charge creatively of their album. Dazai still remembers clearly the moment Chuuya had declared what Mori had said didn't matter, that they were equals, partners. That moment...it had *meant* something to Dazai. Apparently the same couldn't be said for Chuuya, not anymore at least.

It had brought out an anger in himself he'd never felt before. Dazai had flaunted Chuuya's lack of music in retaliation. From Chuuya's expression, his comments had hit the mark. They always have had a knack for knowing exactly how to make the other miserable.

*Are you ever going to grow out of being boring and predictable?* rings Chuuya's voice in his head.

Dazai has never had doubts about his musical talents. He'd been lauded as a genius since he'd been ten years old. Despite his hatred for him, Mori had instilled a confidence in himself that had never been shaken.

It feels shaken now.

Music that could help people, that's what he had set out to create. Odasaku's words had been his touchstone for years, his purpose. Dazai isn't questioning *that*, rather he's questioning his methods.

He doesn't regret Once More With Feeling. It had been the album he needed to write. He'd set out to make music that made people feel lighter, and he'd done it. People that Dazai respects tremendously have congratulated him on the album: Fukuzawa, Santoka, Odasaku.

Then Chuuya had scoffed at it, and now Dazai is staring at ceiling tiles.

Dazai has been going over the songs from Once More With Feeling obsessively in his head, picking them apart, trying to prove that there was nothing *missing* from them.

*Play Me a Song* is literally a love song, it couldn't *be* emotionless. But now when he listens to it all he hears is the lightness that he'd been striving for at the time, none of the deeper emotions that he'd been feeling when he'd written it.

*Music that people connect to, that makes them feel something*, whispers a younger Chuuya in his head. Dazai would bash his head against the wall repeatedly if he thought it would get rid of him (but based on years of experience he knows there isn't a cure.)

Dazai had claimed that Chuuya was terrified of music, but now the thought of trying to write something for himself has him petrified. He doesn't know what his style is anymore, what his

intentions are. It's all just a blank space.

It's ridiculously ironic that the person who Dazai wishes he could ask the most about this is Chuuya. Even after everything, that never changes. He doubts it ever will.

"Stop brooding," says Kunikida, appearing above him and frowning down at him.

"I'm not brooding," lies Dazai easily. "I'm composing. You just made me lose the melody, Kunikida."

Kunikida purses his lips, but doesn't comment further. He sighs then, looking hesitant. "Can I ask you something without you ripping my head off?"

Dazai frowns, sitting up. "I'll try to control myself," he says lightly.

"Have you considered releasing *Play Me A Song* as a single?" asks Kunikida, tone serious.

Dazai would actually like to rip his head off (he really *needs* to get ahold of his newfound temper, this is unnatural for him). "That would be misguided," says Dazai, having to work to make his voice not come out snappishly. He mostly succeeds.

"Why's that?" asks Kunikida, crossing his arms. "The song has been getting a lot of attention since the fundraiser. It could be good for you and the ADA."

Dazai sighs dramatically. "People would buy it and listen to it if I released it as a single, sure. But they'll be disappointed it's not the version they really want."

"The version with Nakahara?" asks Kunikida, frowning deeper. He doesn't seem aware of the emotional minefield he's trampling on.

"How are things coming along with Light Snow?" asks Dazai, not interested in pursuing that subject any further.

"Things are going well," says Kunikida, looking a little surprised at the question. "We're just finishing up some last snags before we start recording."

"Perhaps I could take a look," says Dazai, standing up and walking towards the main office. Kunikida's expression is slightly bewildered as he passes him.

"Tanizaki," calls out Dazai. Tanizaki looks up, face clearly stunned. "Let's run through Light Snow together. I bet we can work out those last kinks."

"*You* want to work with *me*?" asks Tanizaki, looking even more dumbfounded. He quickly tries to school his expression into something less shocked, not that he does a very good job. "I mean, sure. Of course."

He and Tanizaki haven't worked together much on music. Dazai had never offered to help him like he had with Atsushi. But ceiling tiles weren't working to get him out of his foul mood, and finding and fixing the errors in music had always been something he'd found

reassuring. He couldn't solve his own musical quandaries, but perhaps he could remedy Tanizaki's.

"Let's get started," says Dazai brightly.

Chuuya flicks through his phone as he rides the elevator up to the top floor of the PMR office. His inbox is practically full from the updates he'd ignored for two weeks. Chuuya flags the ones that might be important and deletes the rest. He figures if something is really pressing Mori will tell him during their meeting. Chuuya had checked for messages from him first, finding the request to meet this morning.

Being back in L.A. usually feels relieving, but Chuuya's mood remains the same as it was in Mexico, and before Mexico really. He does appreciate being back in view of the Pacific Ocean though, it makes him feel a bit lighter.

Chuuya steps out of the elevator once he reaches his floor and knocks on the door to Mori's office while he slips his phone in his pocket. His hat feels different than usual after a couple weeks of not wearing it on the beach. His thoughts turn to Arthur, wondering what he would think of his current state. He pushes the thought away as Mori calls for him to enter.

"Chuuya," says Mori cheerfully as Chuuya walks towards his desk, appreciating the sprawl of L.A. and the ocean out the window as he always does. Mori seems genuinely pleased to see him. "I hope your vacation was restful."

Restful isn't the first word Chuuya would use to describe it. "It was great," says Chuuya, which isn't exactly a lie. "It's good to be back though. Did I miss anything?"

"Mostly just logistics of how to handle the acquisition of The Guild," says Mori with a light shrug. "Nothing you'd find very interesting."

Chuuya nods in acknowledgment, not sorry he'd missed out on that. Kouyou had probably enjoyed it though. "Everything going smoothly?"

"For the most part," says Mori. "Some artists have been more reluctant about their new label than others."

Chuuya laughs a little, reminded of himself at fifteen. "They'll acclimate."

"Most do with time," says Mori, smiling slightly himself. Then he switches back to his business tone. "I'm keeping the Long Island office, it's convenient to have space out East. I've sent some people out there to oversee things. Some of the artists are staying, those who don't need much supervision. Others are in the process of moving to L.A."

“Sounds like a sound plan,” says Chuuya, slipping back into the role of a record company executive for the first time in weeks, although now the mindset feels slightly tainted. “What are you going to do with Lucy Maud Montgomery?”

“Yes, that’s been on my mind as well,” says Mori, tapping his fingers on his desk with one hand and propping his chin in the other. “She seems to be one of the more reluctant ones. I do have something in the works to make the transition smoother though.”

Chuuya is cut off from answering when there’s a knock on the door. He looks towards the sound, surprised that someone would interrupt a meeting between two executives. But then Mori calls out from them to enter, clearly expecting them.

“You have another meeting?” asks Chuuya, raising an eyebrow. He’s more curious than offended.

“I thought you’d want to sit in on this one,” says Mori lightly, an edge to his smile.

Chuuya’s curiosity rises, then his other eyebrow goes up at who walks in the door. Of all the people he could have expected, Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald would have been towards the bottom of the list.

“Ogai,” calls out Francis confidently as he walks into the room (Chuuya’s not sure he’s *ever* heard anyone call the boss Ogai.) Francis doesn’t look the least bit phased at walking into the office of the man he’d been at odds with for months and who had recently bought out his company from under him. “How are you, old sport?”

“I’m well,” says Mori, smiling with just a little too much teeth. “Thank you for agreeing to meet with us.”

“I’ve recently had some time open up in my schedule,” says Francis lightly. He strolls up and takes the seat next to Chuuya, turning and nodding at him in greeting. “Nakahara.” He quickly turns back to Mori.

“Have you decided on your next move?” asks Mori, tone completely innocent.

Chuuya has very little idea what’s going on, but he is enjoying this immensely. He turns to see Francis’s reply while fighting off a smirk.

“I’m an entrepreneur,” says Francis, smiling without bothering to hide his animosity. “I can always build again from the ground up.”

“I’m sure there are other options,” says Mori, voice just a touch patronizing.

“Did you bring me here to gloat?” asks Francis, losing his humor and crossing his arms.

Mori raises a hand to his chest as if in offense. “Aren’t we old friends?”

Francis laughs sharply. “You don’t have any friends, Mori.”

“True enough,” says Mori with a slight shrug. “Anyway, no this is a job interview.”

Francis's face goes from annoyed to gobsmacked. His voice catches a little. "This is a what?"

Chuuya doesn't bother hiding his own shock as he looks at Mori, raising his eyebrows. Mori flashes him a quick smile before turning back to Francis.

"Yes, there's an open position for an executive for Port Mafia Records," says Mori lightly, his eyes full of amusement. "I've been meaning to fill it for years, just haven't gotten around to it. But now that you're unemployed I think you'd be a good fit."

Francis just stares at him for a moment, then he glances at Chuuya as if to confirm this isn't some kind of joke, then goes back to staring at Mori. Chuuya himself is having a little trouble not keeping his jaw from hanging open in shock.

"Or are you not interested?" asks Mori, frowning slightly.

"You want to make me an executive of your label after you just stole mine?" asks Francis, voice incredulous.

"We've recently acquired a number of artists you're familiar with, you have a great deal of familial connections, you have experience in management," Mori lists off simply. He shrugs again. "Like I said, I think you'd be a good fit."

"I spent the last six months trying to sabotage your company," points out Francis, clearly still bewildered. Chuuya doesn't blame him, he's also still completely shocked.

"I noticed," says Mori, his tone less amused. "That was business, not personal. So is this."

"I was under the impression you didn't particularly like me," says Francis, raising an eyebrow.

"I don't particularly like a lot of people I work with," says Mori mildly. Chuuya has to cover a snort.

Francis starts laughing then, just slightly unhinged. "I always forget you have no sense of pride. It's why people always underestimate you."

"It's gotten me this far," says Mori lightly. "Now then, are you interested in the position?"

"You know that I am," says Francis, sounding annoyed.

"Yes, but you *do* have a sense of pride," says Mori. He gives Francis a flat look.

"Look how far that's gotten me," says Francis, shaking his head. "When do I start?" he asks with a smirk.

"I could use you out in Long Island to settle some of the people who aren't as thrilled about becoming part of Port Mafia Records," says Mori, shifting to a more serious tone. "Though you'll need to move to L.A. permanently soon. Los Angeles has some of the most renowned neurologists in the world, I'm sure we can find one that will take good care of Daisy."



Francis's whole body goes rigid. "Excuse me?"

Mori crosses his arms and leans back in his chair. He looks off to the side. "I don't know how I would have reacted if I'd been placed in a similar situation to yours. If I lost Elise, I'm not sure I could be logical." He turns back to look at Francis, his expression colder. "That being said, I will not allow you to pull the same stunts you did with The Guild. You take a single penny from Port Mafia Records that isn't yours and you will live to regret it."

"I understand," says Francis gravely. He swallows roughly, then reaches his hand forward. "Thank you for the opportunity. *Boss*."

"Welcome to Port Mafia Records," says Mori, smiling widely again as he shakes his hand. "I'm sure you have some affairs to settle." It's an obvious dismissal.

Francis snorts a little. "Of course." He turns to look at Chuuya one last time, smirking at him. "Looking forward to working with you, Nakahara."

"Likewise, Scottie," says Chuuya, smirking back. Francis maintains his smile with obvious effort, dropping it as soon as he turns to walk out of the room.

Mori and Chuuya both watch him go in silence. Once the door clicks shut, Chuuya turns to face Mori again, smiling and shaking his head.

"I assume that's the something you had in the works," says Chuuya, unable to fight off another laugh.

"You're the one who's always saying I shouldn't hold the position for Dazai," says Mori, smiling in his version of laughter. "I figured after we had reached a relative truce with the ADA it was time to make some changes, stop holding onto the past. This presented an optimal solution."

"Boss, I am so grateful I have never had to go up against you," says Chuuya with a huge grin. Then something occurs to him and he has to hold in more laughter. "Have you told Ace yet?"

Mori's smile grows wider. "Alan will have to be informed rather delicately. It's best I do it alone."

"Probably," says Chuuya, although he wishes he could be there to see the look on his face. "Do you trust Francis?"

"It's in his best interest to work with us rather than against us," says Mori with a shrug. "If he steps out of line, I'll handle it."

Chuuya nods. He knows Mori definitely could. "Anything else I missed from when I was gone?"

"That about covers it," says Mori. "Things have obviously settled down in some aspects. Your schedule is going to be much lighter. Are there any projects in particular you're interested in taking on? Anything from The Guild is open."

Mori *asking* him what he wants to work on is distinctly different from how things had been for a long time. It catches Chuuya off guard a little in more ways than one. Of course Mori would assume he'd want to go back to producing, that's what he'd been doing for *years*. Chuuya's flare of irritation doesn't make sense.

"Sure," says Chuuya lightly, fighting off a scowl. (*How does it feel to be an absolute failure?* taunts Dazai in his mind.) "I can work with the ones who are coming to L.A. when they get here."

"Excellent," says Mori. From his shift in tone Chuuya can tell the meeting is over. "Let me know if you need anything in the meantime."

Chuuya stands up to leave. "Sure thing, Boss."

"Oh," says Mori before Chuuya turns away completely. "Can you do me a favor? There's an online magazine that's been desperate for an interview with you. You're in high demand again after the fundraiser. It'd be short, just a few questions about what's next for Chuuya Nakahara."

Chuuya sighs. "Fine. I'll add it to my schedule."

He hopes they don't ask him any questions about fucking Dazai.

Dazai had always known Tanizaki was talented in a kind of abstract way. They'd never been particularly close, and Dazai hadn't made any effort to change that. He had found Tanizaki just a touch aggravating when he'd first joined the ADA due to his juvenile arrogance, but over the years that had faded for the most part. Tanizaki had dropped it completely over these past months, showing a maturity and dedication that Dazai had been surprised by.

Going over Light Snow together has given Dazai an ever greater respect for Junichiro. He'd expected it to be good, not remarkable. Tanizaki's and Dazai's styles couldn't be more different. Tanizaki writes about subjects without shame, be that sex, identity, or self-destruction.

(Dazai couldn't help but note bitterly that *he* didn't seem to have any issues with his music being sentimental drivel.)

Tanizaki's songs did need some polishing though, which is what Dazai has been helping him with over the past couple weeks. There had been some songs that needed just a couple note adjustments here or there, like *The Tattooer* and *Some Prefer Nettles*. They were a little stuck with *The Makioka Sisters* currently, mostly because Dazai thinks it could be the best song and wants to make it flawless.

Tanizaki has been appreciative for the most part, agreeing to most of Dazai's suggestions without complaint. He'd gotten a bit defensive over some lyrics he hadn't wanted to change in the beginning. After Dazai had gotten sick of arguing and said that most artists had at least some subpar sections in their albums, Tanizaki had been more willing to change things.

Dazai had never tried to change the feel of any of the songs (something that he'd carried over from his teenage years that he didn't want to dwell on), he's just trying to make the music the best it can be. Most of the suggestions for the actual changes had come from Tanizaki himself. Dazai usually just had to point out the flaws and Junichiro found a way to fix them.

"I don't think we should change any of the lyrics," says Dazai, staring at the sheet music on the table in front of them. They'd taken over the music room at the ADA, working alone for the most part. Kunikida had popped in once in a while to check on their progress, and Naomi had come to check on Tanizaki frequently. "It's this sequence of chords that's ruining it."

"Yeah, I hear it," says Tanizaki, a contemplative expression on his face. He rubs a hand over his face. Then he grabs the sheet music and brings it in front of himself, scribbling out some new notes (his handwriting is almost as bad as a different redhead Dazai had used to write with that he is forcing himself not to think about. He's semi-successful at best.)

"Hmmm," says Dazai, thinking it over. It could possibly work. He taps his pen and runs through the notes in his head. "That's better, but not quite right yet." He writes on top of Tanizaki's scribbles (much more neatly) and passes it back to Tanizaki.

Tanizaki nods as he looks at it. "No, yeah, I like that."

"I think that one's finished then," says Dazai cheerfully. He grabs his phone, tapping out a few notes. "We're making good progress, we should finish up soon. Then you can start recording and Yosano can start her latest reign of terror."

"That's good," says Tanizaki. Something in his voice makes Dazai look up from his phone, seeing Tanizaki's clearly troubled expression. It's different than the typical fearful expression he gets over doing edits with Yosano, and he's fidgeting with his hands under the table.

"Something wrong?" asks Dazai, trying to keep his tone light. Just because they aren't particularly close doesn't mean he can ignore Tanizaki when he's clearly distraught.

"I'm a little confused why you're helping me so much," says Tanizaki, voice almost sheepish. He shrugs. "I didn't think you were all that interested in my music." He looks down at the table instead of Dazai.

Dazai frowns slightly. It's not like he'd ever singled Tanizaki out as being uninterested. The only person who he'd regularly worked with before Atsushi had been Kunikida, and even that had ebbed and flowed with how often they needed the other's help. Dazai had rarely helped Yosano or Ranpo, or even Kenji. He hadn't meant it to come off as a slight. In fact, he'd thought the distance was somewhat mutual. Dazai had been under the impression Tanizaki didn't *not* like him but that he wasn't his biggest fan.

"I wasn't aware that you wanted my help," says Dazai, trying to sound non-confrontational.

“I don’t,” says Tanizaki quickly, then makes a displeased expression. “I mean, I *do*. I just... don’t get me wrong, I think the world of Atsushi. He deserves all the success he’s had and more.” He drops his gaze to his hands. “But everyone dropped everything to help him, myself included,” says Tanizaki, picking at the edge of the table. “I didn’t expect everyone to do that for me, and Kunikida’s been great. But it makes you wonder, you know, what he’s got that I’m missing.”

Dazai can’t help his frown now. “Nothing,” he says. “Well, actually what he’s got that you don’t is a lot of baggage and self-esteem issues.” Dazai crosses his arms. “Although those are getting better. What I mean is that the reason I haven’t spent much time with you on your music is that you don’t *need* my help.”

Tanizaki doesn’t look convinced, so Dazai sighs and continues. “These songs you’ve written, you should be proud of them. I don’t waste my time on mediocre music. Atsushi wouldn’t have been able to write like this on his own.” Dazai gives him a smile. “You’ve grown a lot as a musician since I’ve known you. Admittedly I thought you were a bit of a brat when I met you, but a brat couldn’t write songs this impressive.”

“I’ve always looked up to you,” says Tanizaki quietly, which is not the response Dazai had been expected. “I look up to all of you. You, Kunikida, Ranpo, Yosano. You had already won a million Grammys by the time you were my age.”

“I won five,” corrects Dazai, shaking his head and rolling his eyes. “Two and a half, really. And I don’t even know where those things are anymore, they’re not important to me.” Dazai gives Tanizaki a long look. “This music, is it what you want to make? Are you satisfied?”

“I am,” says Tanizaki, more sure of himself. “I’ve been dying to put out this album for what feels like forever.”

“That’s what matters,” says Dazai seriously. “Some artists spend their whole lives chasing that, trying to figure that out. Light Snow is extraordinary, and I never lie when it comes to music.” Dazai smiles at Tanizaki. “Comparing yourself to others is just a waste of time. Music is one of the truly unique things about this world, embrace that.”

“I, uh, thank you,” says Tanizaki, scratching the back of his head. “It means a lot, especially coming from you.” He smiles at Dazai, looking loads lighter. “Thanks for all of this really.”

“You did most of the work,” says Dazai dismissively. “I just softened out the edges.”

“You should work at being better at accepting complements,” says Tanizaki, raising an eyebrow. It’s more amusing than annoying though.

The door to the music room opens then, and Naomi pops her head in. Her eyes seek out Tanizaki, ignoring Dazai completely. “Do you need anything, Junichiro? Some water, a snack, a foot rub?” Her voice is sickeningly sweet.

“Nah, I’m good,” says Tanizaki, looking slightly embarrassed.

Naomi pouts. “If you’re sure.” She’s slow to retreat though.

Dazai is reminded of the other reason he's always been a little wary of Tanizaki. He gives him a long look. "If you're going to be stepping into public life, you might want to deal with that." He gestures towards the door.

Tanizaki gives him a confused look. "Deal with what?"

Chuuya adjusts in his chair, trying to get comfortable. He's never really enjoyed interviews, they tended to never ask anything interesting. He's met a few journalists who he actually enjoys working with over the years, but he doubts this small magazine will have anyone that falls into that category.

He keeps a smile on his face though. *You always performing*, says The Count in his mind. Chuuya actually prefers his intrusions to other ones these days.

"Chuuya Nakahara," says his interviewer, a girl who's name he didn't catch earlier. Whatever, it didn't matter. "Thank you so much for being here today."

"It's my pleasure," lies Chuuya easily. This is why he hates these things.

He answers the first few questions without incident, giving decent sound clips that keep him and PMR in good standing. He's hoping they can wrap this shit up so that he can get back to his actual job soon.

Things have been going pretty well at work since he'd gotten back. Francis has turned out to be a surprisingly helpful addition to PMR. If he's holding any grudges, he's hiding them well. Chuuya might not have gotten to be there when Mori told Ace that Francis was going to be an executive, but he had gotten to be in the first executive meeting with both of them. Francis subtly insulting Ace the entire time had made Chuuya almost forget Francis had once called him a street urchin.

He still thinks Francis is a pretentious douchebag, but at least he's entertaining and good at his job. Things with The Guild had been almost seamless since Francis had taken over most of the transitional issues. Chuuya hasn't spent a lot of time with many of their artists yet, though he's had some good conversations with Lovecraft. His music is extremely dark, Chuuya is looking forward to working with him.

The majority of the almost is due to Lucy Maud Montgomery. Unlike the others, Francis's arrival had not put a dent in her misgivings.

"Oh, the girl's an absolute nightmare," Francis had said when Mori had first asked about her. "She loathes me, loathes everyone really. I can't help you out there."

Chuuya had been surprised then when Kouyou volunteered to take her under her wing. He'd thought Kyouka had been an exception due to how young she was. Lucy is already nineteen,

not a child at risk of being taken advantage of.

Chuuya had gone to ask Kouyou about it and her reasoning for wanting to work with her had not been what he was expecting.

“Did you see what those fools at The Guild did with her?” Kouyou had asked sharply. “Braces, pigtails, schoolgirl dresses.” Kouyou had crossed her arms and glared. “It’s juvenile and denigrating for a young woman. The girl deserves to work with someone who is going to give her a career, not milk her for everything she’s worth while she still looks the part.”

“Have you met her?” Chuuya had asked delicately. “I’ve heard she’s not easy to work with.”

“Do you think you were easy to work with when I met you?” Kouyou had asked, raising an eyebrow. “You were a punk with an addiction to leather jackets and anger issues.” Kouyou had smiled and shook her head. “I can handle myself.”

Still, Kouyou has her hands full. Chuuya doesn’t remember the last time he’d seen her this invested in developing an artist. With Kyouka she’d cared more about her as a person and dragged her feet about the actual music aspect. Kouyou seems determined to make Lucy a real star though. It’s been weird in a good way to see Kouyou get more involved with music again without all the tension there had been with Kyouka.

Personality aside, Chuuya has no doubts Lucy has the talent to make a worthwhile album. The girl’s voice is something you don’t hear all that often, a kind of peculiar sound that makes you almost uncomfortable but that you want to hear more of. Plus based on *Anne of Abyssal Red* she clearly knows how to write good music.

Unfortunately in the music business *personality aside* isn’t really an option. Lucy actually reminds him a little of Akutagawa when he’d first been signed (a comparison Akutagawa had *not* appreciated when Chuuya had mentioned it to him.) The girl has put up a fight against every change Kouyou has tried to make. Kouyou always eventually wins, but Chuuya can tell she’s frazzled underneath her calm facade.

Chuuya has been wracking his brains about what to do to help the girl. It’s clear Lucy’s been through a lot. Chuuya had seen her file, her life had not been easy. He feels for her, he really does. But she’s just such a brat that it’s hard to remember that when she’s sneering at you.

Chuuya doubts what worked with Kyouka would have any effect on Lucy. The girls couldn’t be less similar in personality. He’d had to work tooth and nail to get Kyouka to speak up. Lucy has zero problems with sharing her very negative opinions.

It’s been bothering him not knowing what to do. Chuuya is supposed to be good at this shit, at being an executive. If he can’t even do this right, then what was the fucking point?

It’s another reason this interview is so pointless. Chuuya is eager to get the hell out of here beyond just finding it a waste of time. He doubts many people are even going to watch this. He’d never even heard of this magazine before Mori had mentioned it to him.

Then the interviewer (fuck, he still can't remember her name) asks her next question. "Four months from now will be the seven year anniversary of when you and Osamu Dazai released your hugely successful first and only album Double Black and its diamond single Corruption. After performing with Dazai earlier this year, are you planning anything special to celebrate?"

Chuuya knows the answer. The answer has been drilled into him since he'd been eighteen years old. *I'm not allowed to comment on ongoing Port Mafia Records legal disputes.* He'd said it a thousand times. It's on the tip of his tongue.

*(You're a musician who's terrified of music, says Dazai in his mind, voice full of mockery.)*

Instead, what comes out is, "Corruption is insanely overrated, and I would prefer to never hear Dazai's voice for the rest of my fucking life."

His interview's jaw drops open in shock.

*Oh fuck*, thinks Chuuya as he realizes what he just did.

Chuuya's phone is already exploding as he walks out of the building where he'd done the interview. He sighs as he reads some of the texts.

(He knows he should probably regret what he said. He can't quite bring himself to.)

**[Lemon Fucker 12:20pm]: I LITERALLY HAVEN'T STOPPED LAUGHING SINCE I SAW IT**

**[Lemon Fucker 12:20pm]: HOLY FUCKING SHIT**

**[Lemon Fucker 12:20pm]: YOU ARE MY HERO**

**[Lemon Fucker 12:21pm]: MY HERO BABY RED**

Chuuya rolls his eyes, not bothering to reply. There's also texts from Tachihara and Gin, a mixture of supportive and worried. One message in particular catches his eye.

**[Ryuunosuke Akutagawa 12:34pm]: Good luck.**

It feels slightly like karma after he'd lectured Akutagawa after his outburst about Atsushi all those months ago.

Chuuya takes a deep breath. Then, for what is the first time after many months of extremely good behavior, he smashes his phone against the pavement.

“I didn’t plan to do that,” is the first thing Chuuya says as he walks into Mori’s office. He can hear the panic in his own voice. “It just slipped out.”

“Take a seat, Chuuya,” says Mori, cheerful smile in place.

His expression gives Chuuya no indication of Mori’s actual mood though. Fuck, he can’t even remember the last time he’d been genuinely nervous to speak to Mori. They had settled into being almost equals over the last couple years, Chuuya had worked hard to earn his trust. If he had fucked it all up over Dazai of all things he doesn’t even know what he’s going to do.

Chuuya keeps his face as neutral as he can though as he takes a seat across from Mori, crossing his arms so he can hide the slight trembling of his hands. He’s so jumbled up he could puke.

“Calm down, Chuuya,” says Mori lightly, obviously picking up on his nerves. “I’m not angry.” His smile becomes a little more genuine. “Honestly, I always suspected this would happen some day. I’m surprised it took this long.”

“What do we do next?” asks Chuuya, feeling the relief wash over him. Although he didn’t like the implication that Mori had been waiting for him to screw up.

“I doubt we really have to do anything,” says Mori, looking more calculating than amused now. “The tumultuous nature of your and Dazai’s relationship has never really been a secret. I probably should have expected this after forcing you to perform at that fundraiser together.” He shrugs. “It’ll probably end up working out in our favor. People love a good scandal.”

“That being said, it would be best if there weren’t any more slip ups,” says Mori, giving Chuuya a cold look. “Or we’ll be having a very different conversation.”

“It won’t happen again,” promises Chuuya immediately. “I swear.”

“I trust that it won’t,” says Mori, going back to his light and cheery tone. “I don’t think Dazai and the ADA will do anything to fuel the fire now that we’ve resolved to not get in each other’s way. It should all blow over soon.”

Chuuya has to dig his nails into his palms to not say anything about Dazai not needing to respond (because he can keep his temper? Because he doesn’t care? Any reason feels just as shitty.) But he keeps a smile on his face. “I’m sure it will.”

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## **Early October, Three Months & Three Weeks Until the Release of Arahabaki**

Dazai's first reaction when he'd heard the interview had been surprised for the most part. He'd thought Chuuya was PMR's perfectly trained dog. The look of surprise on the interviewer's face had been amusing too. Dazai had wondered what Mori's reaction would be then decided what happened at PMR truly did not concern him, or rather he didn't want it too.

Beyond that, he hadn't really allowed himself to think about it. Kunikida had demanded he not respond, and he'd agreed not to. He and Tanizaki had finished the final edits on Light Snow, and he was now in the process of recording it. Dazai had hoped the satisfaction of getting the music right would linger, but it had dissipated almost instantly.

So he's now back to assisting Atsushi with his album. It's distinctly different than working with Tanizaki. What he'd said to Tanizaki had been true, Atsushi had progressed in leaps and bounds in terms of gaining confidence since he'd met him. But doubts like those aren't so easy to shake. Atsushi still doesn't trust himself completely when it comes to music. He still looks to Dazai for approval, and he still hesitates when their opinions differ.

Atsushi's music is also very different from Tanizaki's. It's almost jarring going from one to the other. Atsushi is still finding his sound, Tanizaki had solidified his. Dazai also doesn't want to interfere with that process for Atsushi really. He's already a little worried how much of an influence he's having on his music.

Dazai doesn't want Atsushi to ever suffer from the kind of second-guessing he's been dealing with over the past month and a half. He wonders what his own music what have turned out like if it hadn't been for Chuuya, or Odasaku, or Kunikida. Then again he also wonders if he ever would have even tried to write anything for himself if he hadn't wanted to put an end to his ex-partner's musical anguish. Probably not.

Regardless, the interview is just another wiggle of the knife in the wound that he'd been dealing with since he'd been eighteen. Chuuya had already made it quite clear how little he valued their partnership, he was just being honest about it in public now. It shouldn't make a difference, shouldn't sting (it still did.)

Kunikida had only brought it up the one time and then dropped it. Ranpo had just given him a look that had made him very, very uncomfortable that he'd decided to ignore. Tanizaki had made a comment about how Chuuya was the one who was overrated which Dazai brushed off as kindly as he could (and then had to work very hard not to spit in Tanizaki's beverage after they'd come to a sort of understanding after working together on Light Snow.) Atsushi had asked him about it the day it happened but accepted Dazai's excuses easily enough to get back to working on the album.

Dazai has kept a smile in place as he's gone about his days, and it doesn't slip at all as he tags along to one of Atsushi's interviews. He's still in high demand after his show stopping performance at the fundraiser. The ADA doesn't want to let him disappear from the spotlight, so they're making an effort to keep him in the public eye from time to time.

After the interview when they get stopped by a couple of press outside the studio, Dazai's smile becomes a tad more genuine. He lets them ask Atsushi questions about his upcoming album. He'd never had a problem with patience. Then one of the reporters finally works up the courage and turns to him.

"Dazai, recently Chuuya Nakahara claimed that your joint single *Corruption* was overrated and that he never wanted to collaborate with you again. Do you have a response?" comes the question.

Dazai had possibly had an idea that this would happen when he'd offered to tag along with Atsushi. He had also possibly been lying spectacularly when he'd told Kunikida he'd let Chuuya's comments go unchallenged. He'd never backed down in a conflict with Chuuya since he'd been fifteen, and that was another thing that was unlikely to change.

Dazai has several variations of a response he could give. Indifference has always been an effective way to taunt Chuuya. He could also make it into a joke, make the whole thing come off as nonsense. He knows that would infuriate Chuuya.

*(The music you write isn't really worth anything, says Chuuya with a cruel laugh.)*

When it comes down to it, it isn't logic that prompts his choice. His response comes automatically.

"I know how much *Corruption* means to so many people," says Dazai dramatically, placing a hand over his heart. "I was appalled to hear Chuuya try to diminish it like that. He's just bitter because any new music he puts out is always going to pale in comparison to *Corruption*. Chuuya Nakahara has peaked, and it's causing him to lash out. He doesn't know how to write real or true music anymore."

"I actually had a different strategy in mind," says Chuuya as he stands in front of Mori's desk after hearing Dazai's interview. He's still practically trembling with the adrenaline and fury he'd felt after he'd read the words. He'd come straight here, too hyped up to wait after he'd come to his decision (and also a little scared that if he gave himself too much time to think he'd change his mind.)

"Did you now?" Mori raises a brow. "What did you have in mind?"

"Two things," says Chuuya. He smiles widely then, feeling his sense of anticipation growing. "I'm going to need your assistance on the first one though."

"Let's hear it," says Mori, smiling himself.

“For the first, I need you to make a deal with the ADA to fix all this PR bullshit,” says Chuuya, waving a hand dismissively. “Whatever you come up with is fine.” He pause a little before his next sentence, feeling the weight of it. “The second is I would like to request to start working on a solo album.”

It had been one thing for Dazai to accuse him of being a failure in private (a devastating, gut wrenching thing), but it was another one entirely to *do it publicly*. Chuuya has never been angrier in his entire life. He’d been tempted to destroy his entire apartment, his phone not satisfactory enough.

But it had also reinforced everything he’d been thinking to himself since the words had come out of Dazai’s mouth after that fucking fundraiser. Chuuya doesn’t *want* Dazai to be right. He wants to prove him wrong, to prove that he’s a fucking musician and always has been.

Instead of an insult (or just an insult), it had felt like a challenge, and Chuuya has yet to ever back down from a challenge from Dazai. Despite the many changes in their relationship over the years, it’s an instinct that’s impossible to resist.

Mori’s grin is practically blinding. “Of course. I’ll shift your other projects around. It should be fine, especially now with Francis on board. I’ll make it work. You just worry about the music.” Mori’s face turns contemplative. “We’ll have to decide how to approach this from a marketing angle. We could create a lot of interest leading up to it. People have been clamoring for you to do a solo album for years.”

“I was thinking January 25th for a release date,” says Chuuya, keeping his voice casual, as if this weren’t essential (though Mori can probably see through it easily.) “Surprise album.”

“Were you now?” asks Mori, eyebrows raised. “That’s quite an accelerated timeline.”

“I practically have the entire thing already written,” says Chuuya confidently. There’s really only one song that he’s actually worried about, but he’s pushing that out of his mind for now. One thing at a time. “That won’t be a problem. Can you make it happen?”

“If that’s what you need,” says Mori, a little less enthusiastic than earlier. Then his face gets smug again. “Tour?”

“Of course,” agrees Chuuya easily. If he’s going to do this, he’s going to do it full out. He’s already excited, picturing himself on stage again without any of the bullshit he’d dealt with during his last performance.

“I’ll start making preparations,” says Mori, eyes flashing through calculations. “Is that all? Did you have a producer in mind? Kouyou? Hirotsu?”

“I was thinking you,” says Chuuya, trying to make his tone casual. He knows it’s a strange request. But when he’d thought about it, there really isn’t anyone else he would want.

Chuuya doesn’t think he’s ever surprised Mori this many times in one encounter. Mori gives Chuuya a blank look. “You were thinking me?” He raises an eyebrow. “I don’t exactly produce anymore.”

“I know,” says Chuuya, shrugging slightly. “I don’t really need help on the music end. But some of the things I want to write about are, well...difficult for me to talk about with other people.” He looks Mori in the eyes. “You already know all of those details, I know you’d focus on the music rather than being preoccupied about any of that.”

“Personal details about your family?” asks Mori, understanding what he means automatically. It’s not a subject they’ve touched on much since Mori had taken care of his mom’s parents all those years ago. Chuuya has always been grateful for that, but he couldn’t write a solo album if he kept avoiding things.

“That and all that stuff that comes with it,” says Chuuya with a sigh. “I don’t care that you know,” he says plainly. “I never have. You’ve never treated me any differently because of anything. But you’re the only one I trust to be objective and tell me whether the music is good or not because you can look beyond any personal feelings.”

“The suffering of the people I care about is not meaningless to me,” says Mori flatly. He almost sounds a touch angry at the insinuation.

“I know that,” says Chuuya seriously. “I know you. But I also know you’d never put that over what’s best for Port Mafia Records.”

“I’m not going to deny that,” says Mori. He nods thoughtfully. Then he gives Chuuya a light smile, both amused and almost fond. “But if you want to meet this deadline of yours I suggest you get to work.”

“Sure thing, Boss,” says Chuuya, smirking as he stands up to leave. “Thanks for everything.”

“I’m looking forward to hearing about your progress,” says Mori lightly, tone full of expectation.

“What part of you are not to retaliate did you not understand?” asks Kunikida the second he walks in the door of the ADA, voice coming out in almost a shriek.

Dazai takes a deep breath. He had prepared himself for this reaction, but that didn’t make it any more pleasant to deal with. “It’s really not that big of a deal.”

Kunikida gives him an incredulous look. “Not a big deal?” he asks vehemently. He gestures with his hands angrily. “The phones have been ringing nonstop, it’s all anyone can talk about on social media. How is that *not a big deal*?”

“Double Black has never been known for being especially amicable,” says Dazai dismissively. “Could actually bring a PR boost, people love a good scandal.”

Kunikida's expression darkens rather than looking relieved. "That's not what concerns me," says Kunikida, clearly trying not to yell. "What's concerning is your blatant disregard for what we'd agreed on because of a ridiculous feud!" His attempts at not yelling do not pan out.

"Ridiculous?" repeats Dazai, his own tone going sharp. His gaze as he looks at Kunikida is cold. "You shouldn't talk about things that you know nothing about."

"Stop it," cuts in Atsushi harshly, shocking both of them. He'd been quiet as he'd walked in behind Dazai. But he's glaring at the both of them now. "This isn't helping anything. We should be working together, not attacking each other."

Kunikida looks severely chastised, and quite guilty. "I'm sorry, Atsushi. You're right."

"I'm not who you owe an apology to," says Atsushi, not softening up.

"I apologize, Dazai," says Kunikida a bit stiffly. He makes himself look Dazai in the eyes though. "It's clearly a more delicate situation than I realized, and I should have been more cognizant of that."

"That's unnecessary," says Dazai, his anger fading completely, being replaced by his own guilt and seemingly never-ending frustration. He hadn't wanted to take out anything on Kunikida. "It was selfish. You're not wrong."

"It's alright," says Kunikida, shaking his head. "We were both at fault. The president isn't angry, and his opinion is the one that matters ultimately." He sighs. "I'm going to go check on Tanizaki." Kunikida doesn't look back as he walks away.

Dazai watches him go with a slight pang in his stomach. He turns to Atsushi and puts on a smile. "It was also selfish of me to take over your press like that."

"I don't care about that," says Atsushi, shaking his head. He gives Dazai a look that's blatantly worried. "I just want to know how you're doing. It isn't like you to be antagonistic towards PMR in the press."

The words *I'm fine* are ready, but Atsushi's expression keeps them from coming out. Dazai doesn't want to lie to Atsushi after he'd stuck up for him. The pang in his stomach grows.

"I'd prefer not to talk about it," says Dazai honestly, smiling without joy. "If you don't mind."

"That's fine," says Atsushi, though he doesn't hide his disappointment completely. "We could if you wanted to though."

"I'd rather we worked on music," says Dazai, his grin becoming a tiny bit more sincere. It might not drive away everything he's feeling completely, but it's his best option.

"Sure," says Atsushi, smiling back. "I'll grab the song we were working on."

Chuuya is sitting at the piano in the front room of his apartment when Kouyou walks in, sorting through the piles of sheet music he'd accumulated over the years. It's possible his organization system had not been great. He knows there's worthwhile stuff in the stack, he just doesn't know where it is.

"So it's true," says Kouyou, voice carefully neutral. "You're going to do a solo album."

"Mori told you then," says Chuuya, spinning around on the bench to face her. He'd expected a response from her, she's one of the few people he's ever confided in about his doubts about making an album.

"Chuuya," says Kouyou, her expression hard to read, "Revenge is not a good reason to release music."

Chuuya could point out that *Golden Demon* and that entire album had been filled with spite, but he doesn't. He isn't looking to start a fight, but he isn't going to back down from his decision. He's never been more sure of anything.

"He said that I *peaked*, Kouyou," says Chuuya, letting his rage at the accusation show. Just because he'd found motivation in it didn't mean he'd gotten over how pissed he is.

"And since when do you let him get in your head like this?" asks Kouyou, frowning in disapproval. She crosses her arms.

"Because he was fucking *right*, Kouyou," says Chuuya, shaking his head. "Not about me peaking, that's bullshit." He rolls his eyes, then continues on more seriously. "But what he said about me at the fundraiser, he was right." He looks Kouyou right in the eyes. "There wasn't a thing he said that I haven't thought to myself deep down a thousand times. I *have* been a coward, and it *is* pathetic." He holds up a hand before she can defend him. "And it doesn't matter if you don't think I'm a failure, it matters that I *do*."

"And I'm fucking sick of it," continues Chuuya, throwing out his hands in frustration. "I'm sick of running. I'm sick of lying and keeping up appearances. I want to make music, real music, for myself, not anyone else. I'm doing this for me, not him. I'm ready now. I'm going to write the best album anyone has ever heard, and it's going to outsell fucking Double Black and *Corruption* by a mile."

Kouyou looks at him for a long moment. Then she nods and walks over to the piano to join him in looking at his mess of sheet music. "Well, alright then. Show me what you've got so far." She gives him a small smile.

Chuuya's own smile as he looks at her is huge. "Okay, then," he says excitedly. "I'm not going for a certain genre or anything. But I do have a theme for the album: honesty."

Later that night, Chuuya picks at the sand with his fingers, the sounds of the waves gently crashing on the shore around him. It's a clear night, the moon making the water visible even at one in the morning. Chuuya is sitting on a quiet stretch of beach, there's no one else in sight and even the city noise of L.A. seems far away.

The smell of salt in the air is comforting. There's a line in an old Isak Dinesen song that he finds fitting: *the cure for anything is salt water: sweat, tears or the sea.*

Chuuya had known he would end up here even before he'd talked to Mori, it had been an inevitability. He'd pushed it to the back of his mind in order to accomplish his goals, but the time for running away had come to a close.

Because he knows if he's going to write an album, there's a certain song he has to tackle first, a song that has been plaguing him directly and indirectly since he'd been sixteen. He won't be able to get very far if he doesn't confront this, if he keeps letting it slowly poison himself year after year.

It's time for him to finish *Arahabaki*.

It sounds like such a simple thing, all he has to do is write one song. Chuuya has helped to write countless songs before. This one is already partially written even. It shouldn't be this daunting, shouldn't make him freeze up with fear every single time he even thinks about the melody.

*You're a musician who's terrified of music*, whispers Dazai in his head. It had hit as hard as it did because it was the truth. Not all music, but this one song. His fear of this one song feels like it had slowly gnawed away at him ever since he'd written the first notes.

Chuuya doesn't want to let it anymore. But he isn't interested in writing another *Corruption*. He's not going to torture himself like that night after night again. He won't. That isn't an option.

But the song persists like a parasite, feeding off him without him being able to find the cure. Despite how human Dazai had always made him feel in the past, Chuuya knows he isn't it. Chuuya will never understate how much that had meant to him, will never stop being grateful (even if he'd said he'd fucking peaked). But in the end, Dazai's opinion on whether he's human or not isn't the one that matters.

This isn't about Dazai, or Arthur, or even about his mom really. It's about him. If Chuuya wants to write an honest album, he has to start being honest with himself.

He has to be honest about why he persists on believing he isn't human, why he isn't worthy of being one.

For many years, Chuuya had hidden behind the excuse that it didn't matter whether he thought of himself as human or not. He'd claimed it wasn't important as long as he had his family and his music. But while that had been more convenient, it wasn't the truth, it *did* matter.

Chuuya had always hoped deep down that there would be a moment, something that would happen that would change things. He'd lived his entire life waiting for the day he'd start to feel human, start to let this go. He'd wanted that so badly, more than anything. Chuuya would have given up anything, even music, to just for one fucking second to not carry around this burden anymore.

The moment had never come though. Even with Dazai or Arthur, who made him feel so human, made him desire to be one so much, it had never been enough. Nothing he did ever changed it. Not music, not friendship, not family, not love. His life is so full, but he still hasn't rid himself of this emptiness.

Chuuya stares at the ocean, wishing it could give him an answer. He pulls up his knees and rests his head on them, staring as one wave crashes, recedes, and then becomes another. Even his attachment to the ocean is defined by his lack of humanity. It feels like there's almost nothing in his life it hasn't tainted.

Chuuya had expected the sea to be the only thing from Dinesen's song he'd need, but his eyes start watering beyond his control. He doesn't even remember the last time he'd cried. He'd almost stripped himself of the habit completely when he'd entered the foster care system, the other kids had not been kind about that kind of display.

Chuuya snuffles and wipes off his face with his sweatshirt sleeve, feeling ridiculously pathetic. He'd been so fucking confident when he'd marched into Mori's office and told him he was ready to do a solo album. He can't even imagine the shame of having to tell him he'd been wrong.

*You are human*, insists Arthur in his head. *The music you write is the most achingly human thing I've ever heard*, echoes Dazai. It hurts more than it helps.

Why were they so convinced? What do they really know about Chuuya? They don't know how empty he really is. He'd become so adept at pretending to be human, they'd probably just bought the act.

*Do you want to know why you and I are so miserable?* his mom asks, agreeing with him. *Because you're stuck with me and I wanted to have a human child.*

He misses her sometimes. It's so fucked up. She'd literally tried to *kill* him. But once in a while he thinks about sitting next to her on a piano, or being dragged to some bizarre restaurant with her, and he wishes things could have been different.



Chuuya swallows roughly. He knows one thing for certain, he doesn't want to end up like his mom. He doesn't want to let the darkest parts of him consume himself until there's nothing left. He won't, he can't.

His thoughts start to turn. Maybe his mistake had been waiting for something to happen to make him feel human. If the people he loves the most in this world hadn't fixed things, why should some abstract event change anything? If music, the thing he loves most in the world, hadn't fixed it, why should anything else?

*Maybe it's not about waiting to feel human*, thinks Chuuya to himself as he stands up and walks towards the water. *Maybe it's about making a decision...*

*Arahabaki* is *his* song, and he's the one who decides what it means. It doesn't have to be a song about how he isn't human. He can make it into a song about how he *is*.

"My name is Chuuya Nakahara," says Chuuya, voice coming out thick and shaky after the crying and lack of use, "And I'm a human." It comes out unsure.

Chuuya clears his throat, pointing a finger out at the ocean. "Listen up universe, you motherfucking pile of shit," he says with more fire, "I am a human fucking being."

"I am not, nor have I ever been, a force of destruction," continues Chuuya loudly. "*Arahabaki* is a story, and I am a real person."

He laughs, even though a fresh stream of tears are flowing down his face. Of course, it isn't that he totally lets go of all his doubts and insecurities, that the hollowness inside him fades away. That would be way too fucking simple.

But Chuuya is making a choice, a declaration that instead of allowing his past to hold him back he's going to actively try to believe in his humanity. He's no longer going to wait for something to make him feel human, he's going to live his life as if he is human. It's slightly terrifying in a different way, but Chuuya is through with letting cowardice rule him.

"I'm not sure whether I'm good at it or not," says Chuuya with a shrug, a hint of a smile on his face. "But I'm a god damn human."

The ocean waves keep crashing, not altered by his words or the shift in his entire worldview. Chuuya's smile grows at the sounds of the water ebbing and flowing, reminded of a song he'd started what feels like ages ago.

Chuuya's smile remains as he starts to trudge up the sand back to his bike. He still has an album to write.

Chuuya walks into Kouyou's office with a piece of sheet music in hand, but the redhead who looks up when he enters isn't the one he'd been expecting.

"Oh," says Lucy, not hiding her displeasure. She gives him a sour look from her spot lying down on the couch. "It's you."

She almost looks like a completely different person from when he'd first seen her perform with The Guild. Kouyou had forced her to see an orthodontist to get clear braces almost immediately after she'd gotten to L.A. and forbid her from wearing her hair in pigtails for the foreseeable future. Kouyou had also made her throw out most of her old clothes and taken her to buy new ones (which had sounded like the shopping trip from hell from Kouyou's description.)

While her appearance had changed, her (shitty) attitude remains pretty much the same. Kouyou is still out of sorts looking for what to do to break through to her, though Chuuya's been too distracted by his own album to pay as much attention as he used to. He's been writing like crazy. Finishing *Arahabaki* had felt like taking his first breath of air after being trapped in a fire. But despite having snippets and piece of other songs, he still has a long way to go if he actually wants to release his yet to be named album by January 25th.

He'd come to the office for the first time in a week and a half to ask Kouyou's opinion on the song he's writing now. He's having some trouble with the opening, it sounds dull. Chuuya is not going to release his first solo album with music that could ever be called *dull*.

"Have you seen Kouyou?" asks Chuuya, barely resisting rolling his eyes at her antics. Had he been this annoying when he was a teenager?

"Nope," says Lucy, popping the p obnoxiously. "We were supposed to meet, but she cancelled."

Chuuya doesn't resist rolling his eyes this time. "Then what are you doing here?"

"Don't really have anywhere else to be," says Lucy with a slight shrug. "Didn't think anyone would bother me if I was in the executive suite." She gives Chuuya a look that conveys he's ruining that for her.

Chuuya snorts. At least she's funnier than Akutagawa had been in his sullenness. Lucy's expression doesn't change, clearly waiting for him to leave.

Fuck, she kind of reminds him of himself too though. Not himself now, but himself at thirteen, before he'd met The Sheep. The anger, the attitude, the refusal to let anyone in, even if they were trying to help you.

Damn, Kouyou is right, he had probably been a nightmare when she'd first met him. If he hadn't been so intimidated by Kouyou he'd probably have been just like Lucy. But Lucy clearly isn't afraid of Kouyou like he'd been. Chuuya doesn't know if that's impressive or stupid.

“Did Kouyou say where she was going?” asks Chuuya, trying to keep his impatience out of his tone. He’s also slightly irritated that he can’t solve this problem himself. He tries not to think about how he’d used to work with someone who was perfect at this part of songwriting.

“Didn’t ask,” says Lucy, turning away from Chuuya and pulling out her phone. “Don’t care.”

Chuuya narrows his eyes at her, scowling a little. He walks over to the piano and sets his sheet music on it, jumping up to sit on top of it. He crosses his arms and looks down at Lucy, who scowls in return when she notices he’s not leaving. She huffs and sets her phone down, sitting up a little to give him a dirty look properly.

“Can I give you some advice?” asks Chuuya, not put off by her glare.

“If I say no are you going to not give it?” asks Lucy flatly, raising an eyebrow.

“No, I’m still going to give it anyway,” says Chuuya, having to fight off another laugh. “You’re...unpleasant,” he says plainly, wrinkling his nose. “You should work on that.”

Lucy’s aloof demeanor fades for real anger. “You don’t know anything about me,” she snaps, her voice getting lower and louder. “You’ve literally had everything handed to you on a golden platter since you were fifteen.” She sneers at him. “What right do you have to look down on me?”

“My father died before I ever met him,” replies Chuuya casually. “My mother committed suicide when I was seven. I was there.”

Lucy’s eyes widen and her sneer is replaced by shock. She looks lost at what to say. Chuuya is a little surprised himself at how easily the words had come, he can’t remember ever jumping right into the subject without dancing around the details. But part of being a human is not hiding from who he is or what he’s been through, especially if he can use it somehow to help this girl, who he still likes quite a bit despite the many reasons she’s given him not to.

“I’m not trying to play who had the worse childhood with you,” says Chuuya, half smiling and shaking his head. “I’m just trying to say I *do* get it, more than you probably know. I get being angry and bitter.” He frowns. “Hell, I’m still angry and bitter. I don’t think that ever really goes away.” Chuuya looks Lucy in the eyes, softening his expression. “Just don’t take it out on other people. It never makes anything better.”

“Then what did you do with it?” asks Lucy so quietly he has to strain to hear her, she’s looking at her hands instead of him. “All that anger?”

“Some of it I put into music,” answers Chuuya, running a hand through his hair. “Some of it I pushed away.” He pulls his legs up on the piano to sit cross-legged. “What helped me the most was finding things that made me feel something other than anger.” He gives her another smile. “Shitty childhoods don’t doom you to a shitty life.”

“Not all of us have those things,” says Lucy, going back to anger. It comes off more bitter than biting though.

“Well, they don’t just fall into your lap,” says Chuuya sardonically, rolling his eyes. “You have to try to get them. Let people in. Don’t be such a brat when people are trying to help you.”

Lucy does a tiny scoff and looks to the side. “What people? People only want to keep me around because I can sing. Nobody cares about *me*.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” asks Chuuya, giving her an incredulous look. “Kouyou has been bending over backwards to try and help you. She’s not trying to take advantage of you,” says Chuuya dismissively. “She’d never waste her time with something like that. She really believes in you.”

Lucy looks at him with wide eyes again, then looks away quickly. “I didn’t even think she liked me,” she says, still not looking at him. She picks at the ends of her hair. “She’s always telling me that everything I do is wrong.”

“I’ve never seen her try so hard to make someone successful,” says Chuuya sincerely. “Not with me, or Kyouka, or even herself.” Lucy looks back towards him and he meets her gaze. “She’s fighting so hard *for* you, not against you. Kouyou isn’t one to share her feelings, but I know she really cares about you.”

Lucy doesn’t seem to know what to say to that, she looks down again and crosses her arms.

“And I bet she’s not the only one,” says Chuuya lightly, smiling warmly despite her not looking. “Look, I’ve always been shit at letting people help me too. I’m trying to get better at it.”

Lucy doesn’t answer, so Chuuya figures they’re done with the subject. He looks down at his sheet music again, frowning in contemplation. “Hey, do you want to give me a hand with this?”

“With what?” asks Lucy hesitantly. It comes off as a genuine question instead of angry like before though.

“Writing a song,” says Chuuya. He hops off the piano and grabs the sheet music, walking over towards the couch and taking a seat on the arm on the side Lucy is sitting on. He toes off his shoes and swings his feet onto the couch (one did not put their shoes on Kouyou’s couch.)

“You want *me* to help you with songwriting?” asks Lucy, looking kind of bewildered.

“You don’t exactly look busy,” he says, raising an eyebrow.

Her eyes narrow at him. “I’ve only ever written one song before.”

“Yeah, *Anne of Abyssal Red*,” says Chuuya, smirking a little. “You know, *Beast Beneath the Moonlight* and *Demon Snow* were more musically complex, but if I had to pick a favorite it would have been yours.” He points a finger at her threateningly. “But never tell Kyouka that.”

“I thought she didn’t work here anymore,” says Lucy, clearly confused.

“She doesn’t,” says Chuuya simply. “We get ice cream. You should come some time.”

Lucy’s confusion grows rather than lessens. But she shakes her head and looks at the sheet music he’s holding. “Who are you writing a song for?”

Chuuya smiles at her widely. “Me,” he says lightly. “I’m doing a solo album.”

“You are?” asks Lucy, voice coming out loud for how close they are. Her face flushes.

“Yeah,” says Chuuya, grin getting even bigger. “It’s a secret though. Keep your mouth shut.”

“Why are you telling me?” asks Lucy, still looking a little flustered.

“I like you, even though you’re unpleasant,” he says with a laugh. “You’re not boring, that’s for sure. Your attitude isn’t devoid of humor like Ryu’s.”

Lucy scowls, losing her embarrassment. “We’ve met,” she says shortly. Then she looks at the sheet music again. Her eyes flick up and she gives him an expectant look. “Well, so what’s this song about?”

Her haughtiness makes him laugh again. “It’s a song about a man I used to know,” says Chuuya. “His name was Arthur Rimbaud.”

Dazai hadn’t settled on how Chuuya would react to his answering interview, he’d always been hard to predict. He’d had a few ideas though, none of which involved him seemingly not reacting at all. It didn’t make sense after he’d been the one to start this in the first place. In general, Chuuya wasn’t known for starting fights he didn’t intend to finish.

Dazai is trying to not think about it though, it isn’t helpful. This is probably for the best anyway. He and Kunikida had smoothed things out after their disagreement fairly quickly, but Dazai still hadn’t enjoyed it. It had reminded him a little too much of PMR, of when his work life had been full of confrontations and competing interests. He *likes* how everyone at the ADA gets along, how they genuinely all like each other. Dazai finds that more valuable than a lot of the music they put out.

So Dazai has been doing his best to not start any more arguments (or real arguments, he still likes to mess with Kunikida. The man would get bored if he didn’t.)

The office has been peaceful for the most part. Tanizaki is getting close to finishing his album, and they’re going to release it in November. Despite Francis being a scumbag, he’d

had a point about comprehensive marketing plans. They're taking their time to make sure the release is a success.

Dazai is also aware now that Francis has taken a spot as the fifth executive of Port Mafia Records. Mori is, as always, the cleverest demon in music. It's both hilarious and disgusting. It's another thing he's putting out of his mind (the list is getting astronomically long, even for him.)

Atsushi's album is...a bit trickier than he'd thought it would be. Some of the songs they're written have been excellent. *Forebodings* and *Waxing and Waning* in particular are exceptional.

But then there are other songs that Dazai feels are just scratching the surface of their potential. Dazai doesn't expect every song to be a masterpiece, but he knows that Atsushi is capable of writing extraordinary music. *Beast Beneath the Moonlight* is proof of that. Dazai keeps waiting for him to pull off another song of that caliber, but so far it hasn't happened.

It's complicated further by the fact that the songs Dazai feels are the weakest are the ones that involve Atsushi's feelings about himself and his past. It would be callous to dismiss them outright. Dazai is still wary in the back of his mind of ending up in another Akutagawa situation.

Atsushi hasn't shown any indication he's dissatisfied with any of the songs. The only concern he's raised about the music is worrying if it's vocally challenging enough. When Dazai had asked him about it he'd muttered something about Akutagawa and then changed the subject.

Dazai had contemplated if he were projecting onto the situation because of his own difficulties, but he'd dismissed that after he kept coming to the same conclusion over and over again. Dazai had been mentored by Mori, and with that came a plethora of things, one of them being an above average ability to compartmentalize. Dazai simply just finds some of the music...lacking.

Until he figures out how to address the problem he's pushing Atsushi towards the songs that do show promise and subtly avoiding working on the others. So far it's worked, but Dazai knows it's not a permanent solution. But until he finds one Dazai isn't going to crush Atsushi's creativity (not when he's been on the receiving hand of that sensation.)

It's late in the afternoon now, and he and Atsushi are taking a break in the main office. Kenji and Kyouka are in the office with school being done for the day. Ranpo and Kenji are talking by Ranpo's desk, though it's more Ranpo bragging and Kenji complementing him (it's why the two get along swimmingly.) Kyouka is sipping a cup of tea at Atsushi's desk, talking to him quietly about his music. Dazai is sitting at his own desk, playing a game on his phone absentmindedly until Atsushi is done talking to Kyouka and they can get back to work.

The door to the office opens then, and a girl with long red hair walks in, a determined expression on her face. The rest of the office goes quiet, it's been a while since they've had an unexpected guest.

“I forgot how small this place is,” says the girl as she walks in and looks around, and it’s the voice that makes Dazai realize who she is. Lucy Maud Montgomery looks almost like a different person than the last time he’d seen her. She’d ditched the schoolgirl look completely, hair straight and wearing a simple dark green dress.

“Lucy?” asks Atsushi, his voice coming out loud and incredulous. He would have broken the mug he’d been holding if Kyouka hadn’t moved to catch it before it fell.

“Did you forget who I am?” asks Lucy hotly, crossing her arms. Her eyes narrow as she glares at Atsushi.

“Of course not!” Atsushi throws up his hands in innocence. “You just look really different. Good different!” he clarifies quickly. “Not that you didn’t look good before!” Atsushi adds, voice getting more frantic as he continues.

“You said to come see you again the next time I was in L.A.,” says Lucy, looking off to the side. “I’ve been busy settling in with PMR, so it took a while. I thought that you meant it.”

“I did mean it!” exclaims Atsushi, coming around his desk to talk to her face to face. He scratches the back of his head sheepishly. “I just thought you would, like, text or something first.”

“You didn’t give me your number,” says Lucy flatly, her expression equally flat.

Dazai hears Ranpo softly call out a boo and has to smother a snort. Atsushi shoots him a quick dirty look, and Dazai almost loses it again.

“Forget it,” says Lucy, shaking her head. She turns back towards the door. “You’re clearly busy.”

“I’m not busy!” says Atsushi hurriedly, grabbing her wrist before she gets far. “You just surprised me.” He smiles at her warmly. “Let’s get something from the cafe downstairs, catch up,” he offers, just a hint of pink on his face.

Lucy’s face meanwhile is almost as red as her hair. “Fine,” she agrees haughtily. She starts stalking off towards the door, looking over her shoulder as she goes. “Are you coming or what?”

“Coming,” says Atsushi, jerking into motion to follow her. He waves over his shoulder as he walks out the door.

Dazai watches the door shut with raised eyebrows, looking over at Ranpo to see him with a similarly amused expression. This is the same Atsushi who had barely wanted to take breaks from working on his album since the fundraiser, who gets irritated with Dazai when he asks him to ditch work.

“I didn’t know those two were close,” says Dazai lightly. He doesn’t think he’s ever heard Atsushi mention her before except for saying he’d liked her single when it first came out.

“They met at the fundraiser,” speaks up Kyouka, surprising Dazai. She’s looking at the tea Atsushi had almost dropped unhappily. “He says she’s really nice.”

“Huh,” says Dazai, propping his legs up on his desk and resting his head on one of his hands. He turns to look at Kyouka, thinking about his discussion with Tanizaki from not too long ago. Atsushi had also been making some pointed and unsubtle comments about how it would be nice if he and Kyouka got to know each other better.

“Well, want to write a song while my protégé has abandoned me?” he asks Kyouka, giving her a cheerful look. At the very least it would be better than waiting around for Atsushi. Dazai isn’t sure he’s going to come back today at all.

Kyouka gives him a blank look that is slightly unsettling. “I’m not recording music right now,” she says flatly.

“You are allowed to write songs for people other than yourself,” says Dazai, raising an eyebrow. He doesn’t know why a slight from a fourteen year old girl is getting to him so much. “We could sell it. Or do nothing with it. That is allowed, you know.”

Kyouka gives him another long look. “I suppose we could give it a try.” Her tone is not entirely convincing.

Dazai has to fight not to roll his eyes. Teenagers could be so dramatic. He keeps his smile in place though. (He is *not* thinking about how the last song she’d written had been with his ex-partner.)

“What kind of song were you thinking?” asks Kyouka, coming to sit next to his desk with her mug of tea (which is not helping with the not thinking about Chuuya thing.)

“Well, what’s your favorite song?” asks Dazai, hoping to get an idea of her taste in music. *Demon Snow* had been a rather abstract and fantastical song. Not exactly Dazai’s style, but he could give it a try if that’s what Kyouka wanted.

Kyouka gives him another long look, one he doesn’t understand. Then her expression softens for some reason. “*Aoto Zōshi Hana no Nishiki-e*,” she answers, smiling just slightly.

“Kawatake Mokuami,” says Dazai, nodding in appreciation. It’s certainly a step up from *Treasure Island*. “*Renjishi* has always been my favorite of his, though I don’t dislike *Aoto Zōshi Hana no Nishiki-e*.”

Kyouka laughs then, covering up her mouth with her hand to hide her giggling.

“What?” asks Dazai, a little annoyed.

“It’s just,” says Kyouka, trying to get ahold of herself, “Everyone told me you were such a music snob.”

“He is,” calls out Ranpo from his desk. Dazai doesn’t bother acknowledging him.



“It’s called having taste,” he says to Kyouka, a slight smirk on his face. He brings out a blank piece of sheet music. “So, do you want to write in Japanese or English?”

Chuuya feels slightly nostalgic as he walks into the practice room where The Black Lizards are playing. It feels like forever ago when he’d been so pissed to spend all his time in one of these rooms with them. They’re getting close to being done with their third album, *Landscape of the Soul* (and Chuuya is possibly slightly bitter they don’t struggle at all to come up with album titles.)

He hangs out near the door after he enters, watching them play for a moment. It’s a song he’s never heard before, *In Obscurity*. Tachihara and Gin had perfected the rhythm section of their sound years ago. They keep giving the other subtle looks throughout the song that Chuuya doesn’t understand at all but that they clearly did. Kajii is in full swing, belting out the lyrics in his typical chaotic and unpolished delivery that Chuuya would never be able to replicate. Higuchi and him play off each other well, her usual haughty demeanor less present while she plays. Instead she matches Kajii’s smugness, sharing smirks with him as she plays the guitar expertly to the rock song.

Chuuya is surprised then when Tachihara cuts them off in the middle of the second chorus, stopping playing and sighing loudly.

“What?” demands Kajii, spinning to face him angrily. “What now?”

“Did you hear it?” asks Tachihara to Gin, ignoring Kajii completely.

“I heard it,” confirms Gin, which only seems to piss off Kajii even more by the way he bristles.

“Can you two stop being so,” Higuchi gestures in disgust with the hand not holding her guitar, “You two for five fucking seconds and tell us what you mean?”

“She didn’t use to swear this much,” says Tachihara, still looking at Gin, smirking slightly now. “I think it’s Kajii’s fault.”

Higuchi huffs dramatically, all of the cool she’d displayed during the song disappearing. Kajii snickers a little too, which darkens her expression further.

She looks away from them in annoyance, which is why she notices Chuuya first. “Oh,” says Higuchi, frowning at him. “What are you doing here?” The others turn to see who she’s looking at.

“I need a favor,” says Chuuya, smiling and coming into the room further. He stops at the cold looks he’s receiving from the band though.

“A favor, he says?” asks Kajii, his voice mocking. He turns to Tachihara. “A favor? After he’s basically ignored us for a fucking month?”

“The audacity of some people,” says Tachihara, shaking his head.

“Truly unbelievable,” adds Gin flatly.

“So if you’ll excuse us,” says Higuchi snottily, “We’re in the middle of a something.”

“Fuck off, I’ve been busy,” says Chuuya, scowling and crossing his arms.

He takes a deep breath, shrugging off his irritation. They certainly had a point. He had been pretty absent ever since he’d started working on his album, and only a few people even know he’s working on one. Mori is keeping it pretty tightly under wraps, just like he’d asked. His excuses for being gone had not been great either, he probably should have expected they’d be pissed.

It’s not that he hadn’t wanted to tell his friends, he *had* been planning on it. Chuuya just honestly hadn’t gotten around to it yet. He’s pretty much been writing around the clock. He’s finished with well over half the album now, but he can’t let up if he wants to meet his deadline. Even this visit had a purpose.

“I’m working on a solo album,” announces Chuuya, smiling a little as Kajii and Higuchi’s faces go completely blank.

Then he’s caught off guard by the sound of drumsticks hitting the ground violently, and looks over to see Tachihara jumping up from his drum set. He rushes Chuuya and pulls him into a forceful hug.

“Fuck yeah you are,” says Tachihara as he crushes him, his voice full of excitement. Chuuya shoves him away and grins at him widely.

“That’s awesome, Chuuya,” says Gin as she appears next to them, flashing him a rare full smile.

“Fucking finally,” says Kajii, but he’s possibly grinning the widest of all of them. “Got sick of piggybacking off others?”

Higuchi comes forward too, smiling slightly. “So what does the great Chuuya Nakahara need our help with?”

Chuuya rolls his eyes, but doesn’t stop smiling. “Well, you see, there’s this song I’ve been having some trouble with.” His smile becomes more of a smirk. “A rock song. But I just can’t get it right.” Chuuya shrugs. “It keeps coming out too *soft*,” he says wryly. “Maybe you guys could help me with it?”

Kajii cackles, looking absolutely delighted. He raises a hand to his chest. "It would be our fucking pleasure, Baby Red."

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### **Early November, Two Months & Three Weeks Until the Release of Arahabaki**

In all of the scenarios Dazai had envisioned of how Chuuya would respond to his comments, he'd never foreseen him getting *Mori* to do an interview calling their argument insignificant and to make an agreement with Fukuzawa to call a PR ceasefire and play nice on the anniversary of the song that he wishes he'd never hear again. It had been devastatingly efficient (and devastating in other ways as well.)

But while he'd ignored Kunikida's warnings last month, he has no intentions of ignoring the president's wishes. He isn't interested in causing more trouble for the ADA. This past year has been rough on everyone. Dazai doesn't want to add to that load by being self-centered.

He makes vague plans to buy every copy of the article he can find after he leaves work and setting them on fire. It will be bad for the environment, and ultimately won't stop people from reading it. But the idea makes him feel a little genuine joy, which isn't as easy to come by these days.

Dazai is distracted from his plans of very small-scale arson by Kunikida taking a seat at his desk, spinning in his chair to face Dazai. Dazai briefly considers ignoring him, but knows it probably wouldn't work for long.

"Did you need something?" asks Dazai lightly, putting on a smile.

"I know you probably don't like it," says Kunikida, eyeing the copy of the article Dazai had nonchalantly ripped into pieces and thrown in the trash. "But this *is* a good thing. As much as I dislike Port Mafia Records, us getting along with them only benefits us."

"I'm aware of that," says Dazai, keeping his voice airy.

"You're very difficult to argue with," says Kunikida, irritation seeping into his tone.

"I wasn't aware that we were having an argument," says Dazai, raising an eyebrow. "I just said I agreed with you."

Kunikida sighs and adjusts his glasses. "It's not that I don't sympathize with you. I don't imagine it was easy to perform again with someone you clearly don't get along with and have such a history of hostility with."

Dazai imagines adding Kunikida's stationary collection to his arson plans for a moment, but reminds himself Kunikida is trying to be nice to him. It's not like he can expect Kunikida to know how he'd felt about that performance when he'd never given any indication he'd felt otherwise. Dazai has always been careful to give the impression he does loathe Chuuya, it shouldn't set him off that he'd done such a good job.

“Never become part of a duo,” Dazai advises Kunikida instead, shaking his head. “There’s a reason they’re uncommon.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” says Kunikida with a hint of a smile. “Though I find having someone to write music with helpful.”

Kunikida is being *very* nice to him, which is the first thing since he’d read that disgusting article of lies that makes Dazai’s sour mood start to dissipate. Dazai sighs lightly and hides his own fond smile by picking up a piece of sheet music.

“Let’s not dwell on such unpleasant topics, Kunikida,” says Dazai brightly. “The best is yet to be.”

“Did you just quote William Wordsworth?” asks Kunikida, astonishment clear in his voice.

Dazai doesn’t answer, just brings the sheet music down enough so Kunikida can see his smirk.

Kunikida rolls his eyes, his version of affection. “How are things coming along with Atsushi’s album?”

Dazai glances around the room to make sure they’re truly alone. Tanizaki is with Yosano, now on the receiving end of her lessons on proper celebrity etiquette that he’d once envied. Based on his facial expressions, he misses the time before he’d gotten them. Ranpo had dragged Atsushi with him to an appointment he had with Kuroiwa Ruiko about doing a song, claiming he wanted to expand Atsushi’s network (in reality the meeting was across town and Ranpo didn’t know how to get there.)

“Atsushi’s enthusiasm hasn’t waned at all,” says Dazai once he confirms no one else will hear them. “But I’m not sure he’s living up to his full potential.”

“Have you told him that?” asks Kunikida, frowning at the dilemma.

“I’d like to not crush his spirits,” says Dazai, frowning himself. “His confidence has grown a lot, but I don’t want to erode it. And some of the songs *are* impressive.”

“But you think he could do better,” says Kunikida, picking up on Dazai’s feelings easily.

“I know he’s capable of great songwriting.” Dazai sets down his empty sheet music and crosses his arms. “But it seems like he’s avoiding going into the kind of depth he did with *Beast Beneath the Moonlight*, the raw vulnerability that made the song so popular.”

“Perhaps he hadn’t found his sound when he did *Beast Beneath the Moonlight*,” suggests Kunikida. “Maybe this is the type of music he prefers to write.”

Dazai sighs a little. He forgets sometimes that he and Kunikida’s opinions on music don’t align exactly. Kunikida doesn’t need music to have depth to enjoy it. He doesn’t appreciate “melancholic music.” Dazai had leaned into that philosophy when he’d written *Once More With Feeling*. Kunikida isn’t to blame for his newfound misgivings about his old album though, he’d done nothing but support him.

Nevertheless, he doesn't want Kunikida's opinions to influence him into ignoring his gut feelings on Atsushi's album. Atsushi is one of the few people Dazai knows who has given him nothing but endless support. At the very least Dazai owes him honesty about his music in return.

How to word that honesty is something he's trying to figure out though.

"I think he's hesitating for some other reason," says Dazai, picking up his sheet music again. He moves to change the subject, Kunikida couldn't solve this one for him. "Kyouka on the other hand is quite the talented little songwriter. *The Grass Labyrinth* is really something. She's got a way with metaphors for someone so young."

"You've been writing a lot of music lately," says Kunikida, in a tone Dazai doesn't quite like.

It is true he's been writing a lot lately. He's still working with Atsushi, but he'd been writing a bit with Kyouka in the afternoons. The way she writes songs matches well with Dazai's own, probably on account of who taught her how to write songs (which Dazai is still attempting to ignore.) They've been getting along surprisingly well when they write, though they don't discuss much outside of music.

Dazai had even tried writing a song with Kenji too. They had gotten a song out of it, *Night on the Galactic Railroad*. But as opposed to Kyouka, he and Kenji couldn't be farther on ends of the musical spectrum. Dazai is not eager to repeat the experience. Kenji is far too kind and optimistic to be writing with someone like Dazai.

All the songwriting has reminded him of being eighteen and living with Santoka (although with less books and homemade meals.) It's been an interesting challenge to try and write in so many different genres and vocal ranges again.

Kunikida had not made his writing sound like a good thing though.

"This *is* a record label," points out Dazai, voice just a hint sharp. Music has been one of the only things that has been keeping him sane these past couple months.

"Has any of that music been for yourself?" asks Kunikida, tone serious.

Dazai stops cold, giving Kunikida a blank stare. He tries to recover quickly. "I would have told you if I was planning to work on another solo album." His voice comes out perfectly natural, his expression calm and serene.

"I am," says Kunikida, looking Dazai in the eyes. "Now that Tanizaki is done with his album and things have settled down around here, I've been thinking about starting one. I know you're helping Atsushi, but that doesn't mean that you can't start on your own as well. Clearly you have the time to write other things on the side."

Dazai swallows roughly, staring at the blank sheet music in front of him. It's an apt image of his feelings towards starting a solo album. His inspiration has never been less present, not while the words *boring and predictable* keep ringing in his head.

“Once More With Feeling,” says Dazai, turning to look at Kunikida again, “Do you think it’s... slightly maudlin?”

“Where is that coming from?” asks Kunikida, crossing his arms and looking at Dazai in confusion. “I helped you write it. Do you think I would have held my tongue if I thought anything like that?”

“Right,” says Dazai, voice coming out rougher than he’d like it to. He subtly clears his throat. “Forget it. Anyway, while I can work on multiple things at once I’d prefer to keep to one major project at a time.” He shrugs lightly. “Maybe once Atsushi’s album is finished,” he lies. “But if you want help at all with yours, just say the word.” He smiles at Kunikida breezily.

He wonders if he sounds as much of a coward to Kunikida as he does to himself.

Chuuya is laying on the floor and humming to himself when Kouyou walks into his apartment. He glances around the room with a slight frown, she’s not going to be impressed with how unclean it is. He’d never been very organized to begin with, and that had only escalated as he’d worked on the album. The room is full of instruments, sheet music, empty mugs, and various clothes.

Arthur’s hat is sitting up on his piano in its new spot though. Chuuya likes to keep it there as a reminder of him and his advice, but he no longer wears it everywhere he goes. He’s trying to let go of the past rather than cling to it. He’s been getting some strange looks without it though.

Kouyou gives the room a quick look and shakes her head slightly at the mess but doesn’t comment on it. She walks towards him, looking at the white board he’d bought (he’d thrown away his old one) for writing his tracklist on. It’s also full of potential album titles, all of which completely suck.

“You’re getting close to being done,” she says thoughtfully. Kouyou had been helping him here and there, but he’d been doing the majority of the writing alone.

He’d also just written the initials of his songs instead of the full names. Chuuya knows everyone is going to hear *Arahabaki* eventually, but he’d like a little more time to prepare for that mentally. He’d only consulted with Mori about it once, and that was just to confirm the song met his standards.

Chuuya had also written a song for Kouyou and is trying to keep it a secret. He’d ended up going to Lucy for help when he’d gotten stuck with it, she’d bluntly told him what was wrong with it. It had been helpful and humbling.

Lucy seems less tempestuous these days. She's not going to win any congeniality awards, but she's stopped snarking at every comment others made. Chuuya likes her snark though, it's entertaining to spend time with someone with no interest in putting on a polite act.

Her and Kouyou are in the beginning stages of starting her own solo album. Lucy seems happy about it, though she doesn't display it much. Her eyes light up whenever the subject is mentioned. Chuuya likes talking music with her, her ideas are always distinctive. He has no doubts her album is going to be a hit.

Chuuya actually had convinced her to come get ice cream with him, Elise, and Kyouka once. It had been a van full on disparate personalities and awkward silences. He'd thought it was kind of a disaster personally. But then the next time he'd seen Elise she'd talked about how much fun she was having showing Lucy around L.A. Chuuya doesn't really get how it all worked out, but he's happy Lucy isn't stuck around the office alone.

"What are you working on now?" asks Kouyou, bringing him back to the present.

Chuuya sits up on his elbows. "Nothing, really," he says with a sigh. "Just playing around with some ideas."

Kouyou looks back at his white board. He's up to ten songs. It's a good thing Chuuya has a lot of leeway around PMR, otherwise he would never have been able to release the album when he wanted to in this amount of time.

Something about Kouyou's expression seems troubled though. Chuuya sits up fully.

"What's that face for?" he asks her, crossing his arms.

Kouyou purses her lips then smooths out her expression again. "I was just wondering if you were going to include a love song," she says, voice carefully neutral, looking down at him.

Chuuya huffs and lies back down on the ground. Kouyou is very aware of who would be the inspiration if he wrote a love song, though it's not something they generally speak about much.

Kouyou walks over to him and nudges his side with her foot until he looks up at her. Her expression is annoyed. "I prefer verbal responses to my questions."

"I tried," he says quietly, looking away again.

"I prefer audible responses as well," says Kouyou, tone even more annoyed.

"I tried," repeats Chuuya louder, sitting up again in a cross-legged position. "I just...have you ever felt too many things about one person?" He gives Kouyou a wry smile. "You try to write, but all your emotions make a giant contradiction?"

That's what had happened whenever he'd tried to write something like a love song. He would think about meeting brown eyes on a stage, then remember slamming the door after asking for help after the worst night of his life. Being woken up in the middle of the night by careful hands, then throwing insults and smashing more phones than he should have. Writing music,

eating in the strangest places, leaning against each other in the sand. The ever growing pit in his stomach as he'd stopped getting phone calls, when he'd found out he wasn't even worth a goodbye, hearing *Run, Melos!* for the first time.

Every time Chuuya tries to put his feelings into music it becomes a jumbled mess. He'd tried soft versions, bitter versions, ballads and the opposite. Nothing had worked. Chuuya has wasted more pages trying to get it right than on any other song he'd ever written.

He's surprised when Kouyou takes a seat next to him on the floor, adjusting her clothes so she can sit cross-legged next to him. She gives him a soft smile, her voice gentle. "Why can't it be a contradiction?"

Chuuya blinks in confusion. "What happened to every song should tell a cohesive story?"

"It is a story," says Kouyou, shaking a head. "A story about two people, those usually aren't simple, not real ones." She raises an eyebrow. "I thought you wanted to write an honest album."

"I do," says Chuuya, biting his lip. "I just kind of need to get this one right." He stares at his hands. "You know what I mean, right?"

"I do," says Kouyou, nodding a little. "And I think you will, when you stop worrying about getting it right and just be sincere, no matter what it is you're feeling." Her smile becomes more of a smirk. "Besides, I highly doubt the person who wrote a spontaneous piano solo into a song at sixteen doesn't know how to deal with conflicting emotions."

Chuuya snorts, shaking his head. He tries to picture it, not trying to hold back the negatives or the positives, but allowing them to coexist. He starts to smile, imagining how people would react. He gives Kouyou a grateful look. "It's a little irritating how you're *always* right, you know."

"If you would just accept it already things would go much more smoothly," says Kouyou with an extremely self-satisfied expression.

Chuuya laughs and gets up from the floor, reaching down a hand to help her up too. She grabs it and pulls herself up. He's surprised when she doesn't let go though.

"I've always been extraordinarily proud of you," says Kouyou simply, giving his hand a light squeeze. "But watching you lately, how full of life you've been. It's been really nice to see."

"Kouyou," says Chuuya, looking away in embarrassment.

"No, I am wrong sometimes," says Kouyou, grabbing his chin and forcing him to look at her. "I was wrong when I didn't encourage you to do a solo album. I should have realized how important it was to you."

"I wasn't ready then," disagrees Chuuya. He takes a deep breath. "There's things I've been writing about, things I never really talk about." He gives her a rueful smile. "Things I don't really think I can talk about outside of music."



“I guessed as much,” says Kouyou, looking pointedly at his vague tracklist. She smiles slightly. “I’m glad that you feel like you can put those things into music. You’ve seemed less burdened since you started working on the album, more yourself.”

“Thanks,” says Chuuya quietly. “And thanks for all of your support. I’d still be a stupid street punk if it weren’t for you.”

“I’m willing to accept a little bit of the credit,” says Kouyou, just a hint teasing. Then she gives him a slight shove towards the piano. “Enough of this, you have a song to work on.”

Chuuya rolls his eyes and walks towards the kitchen instead. “How can one resist an order from the great Kouyou Ozaki?” he asks sarcastically. He flicks on his kettle. “Tea?”

“I don’t think I was entirely successful in stripping you of your punk attitude,” says Kouyou mildly, giving him a flat look.

Chuuya laughs while he grabs two mugs.

“Just because *The Raven* is Poe’s most well known song doesn’t mean it’s his best,” says Ranpo, waving his fork in the air to emphasize his point. “He has a plethora of better ones.”

“I prefer *The Bells* personally,” says Yosano. There’s a hint of a smirk on her face, she likely knows her choice will set off Ranpo. She hides it by taking a bite of her cake.

Dazai rolls his eyes as he takes a bite of his own cake. He, Yosano, Ranpo, Kunikida, and Atsushi are sitting in the main office and eating the leftover cake from Tanizaki’s album release celebration (Ranpo had been the one to bring the enormous cake).

Light Snow has been doing really well. Tanizaki is on cloud nine. The album quickly became a critical success, and commercial success is slowly ramping up. His willingness to write about the shocking without shame is making him popular with the younger crowd, and his musical sophistication is appealing to the older.

Tanizaki is off doing a short press tour for the next weeks, Naomi tagging along. Dazai hadn’t noticed how much energy they added to the office until they were gone. Not that it’s ever dull around the ADA, but there’s less outbursts throughout the day.

Such as the current argument about which of Edgar Allen Poe’s songs is the best. Ranpo had mentioned a new song Poe was writing and it had quickly turned into a heated discussion.

“*The Bells?*” repeats Ranpo with clear disdain. “You find that much repetition enjoyable?”

“Practically all of his songs have repetition,” points out Yosano. She turns to Dazai, another amused smile in place. “You haven’t shared your favorite.” She’s always found Dazai’s disdain of most music entertaining.

“Hard to choose,” says Dazai lightly. “Probably *The Pit and the Pendulum*.”

“I don’t know why every song he writes has to be so horrific,” comments Kunikida, frowning as he takes a sip of coffee.

“He excels in mystery and macabre,” says Ranpo with a shrug. “I’ve tried to convince him to write a song about Karl.”

Dazai almost chokes on the bite he just took while trying not to laugh. Poe’s raccoon is one of the friendliest creatures he’s ever met. He’s sure if Poe wrote a song about him he’d turn him into a monster.

“Are we entirely sure that raccoon is properly vaccinated?” asks Kunikida lowly to Dazai. Dazai has to fight off another snort.

“I like *Annabel Lee* the best,” says Atsushi thoughtfully. “My second favorite is probably *The Tell-Tale Heart*.”

“You’re all wrong,” says Ranpo, shaking his head. “Though my songs are of course the best, Poe’s greatest is clearly *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*.”

“You mean it’s not *Lenore*?” asks Yosano with a falsely innocent voice. Ranpo scowls at her.

They’re distracted by the sound of the door of the office opening (Dazai’s requests of getting a lock are still being shut down.) A tall figure walks through the door, taking in the place with a thoughtful smile.

The ADA has had many unexpected visitors over the past year, but this is the only one that makes Dazai spit out the sip of coffee he’d just drank. Kunikida turns to give him a concerned look.

“This place is cozy,” says Odasaku, hesitating a little on the last word. It’s no doubt a large change from PMR. He walks towards their group, smile growing bigger.

Dazai stands up, feeling his own returning smile start without making a decision. “Odasaku?”

“Long time no see, Dazai,” says Oda, placing his hands on Dazai’s shoulders and squeezing them lightly.

“Who are you?” asks Ranpo, giving Oda a suspicious look. Yosano whacks his shoulder.

“I’m sorry,” says Oda, laughing a little. “I just feel like I already know all of you. Dazai talks about you all the time, then through your music. I’m Sakunosuke Oda, an old friend of Dazai’s.”

Dazai thinks he hears Ranpo whisper something to Yosano that sounds like *Dazai has friends?* but chooses to ignore it. His excitement at seeing Oda hasn't made his appearance make more sense. "What are you doing here?" his voice coming out slightly incredulous.

"You hungry?" asks Oda, smile becoming more of a smirk.

"There is no one that makes curry like this in Washington," says Oda contently, leaning back in their booth. The old restaurant they had frequented barely looks like any time has passed. "I'm so glad this place is still here."

It had been strange coming here again with Odasaku, like something out of a dream. Oda had driven them and they'd walked to the restaurant much like they'd used to. Both their lives have changed so much since those days though, down to their wardrobes. It's an odd combination of *deja vu* but not.

"So you traveled across the West coast for curry?" asks Dazai skeptically. He's still surprised Oda is actually here.

Oda hadn't visited L.A. many times since moving. Dazai had gone to Washington a few times for short visits, but they mostly talked on the phone. They didn't necessarily talk often, but whenever they did it felt natural, like little time had passed.

Oda isn't the type to make spontaneous visits. He doesn't get a lot of time off of work either. So this appearance is very out of the ordinary.

Oda sighs, setting down his fork. "It's a dual purpose visit."

Dazai raises an eyebrow, gesturing for him to go on.

"Ango made lieutenant," says Oda, voice careful. He knows Dazai's opinion of Ango hasn't shifted. "I went to the ceremony."

Dazai tries not to scowl but is unsuccessful. "You two are still close then?"

"Yeah, we are," says Oda, shaking his head. "I can't force you to like him, but I wish you wouldn't hate him for my sake."

"It's not only for your sake," says Dazai, crossing his arms. "He's not a horrendous person. I just don't trust him."

"Like I said, I can't force you to like him," says Oda, though his expression clearly wishes otherwise. His face grows more troubled. "Do you ever resent me for telling you to leave

PMR?”

Dazai’s eyes widen. “How could you possibly think that?”

“At the time, I was only thinking about all the horrible things PMR gave you,” says Oda, frowning down at his plate. “I wasn’t thinking about what you might lose.”

“I think we’ve known each other long enough to not be cryptic around each other, Odasaku,” says Dazai, tone with just a slight edge.

“You’ve been...off since that fundraiser,” says Oda plainly. “I’m worried about you.”

“How have I been off?” asks Dazai. He’s genuinely curious, no one else has mentioned it. He’d thought he was pulling it off rather well (aside from the one interview).

“Dazai, I think we’ve known each other long enough not to lie to each other,” says Oda pointedly.

Dazai sighs, moving his food around on his plate (the curry is still much too spicy for him.) “What do you think of Once More With Feeling?” he asks quietly.

“You know I like it,” says Oda, his tone kind and confused. “Why are you asking?”

Dazai sighs again, a little louder. “I knew you’d say that.”

“It isn’t like you to doubt yourself,” says Oda, frowning with concern.

“I know,” says Dazai, he rests his chin in one hand and drums the other along the table. “It’s not doubt exactly.” His frown deepens. “I guess I’m kind of lost on what type of music I want to make. I thought I’d figured it out, music that helps people.” He gives Oda a small smile at that, before frowning again. “And I *am* proud of Once More With Feeling, I don’t regret it at all. But the style, it just doesn’t feel right anymore.”

“I’m not a musician,” says Oda, shrugging a little. “I don’t know anything about writing music. But I do know that the first step towards changing is being honest with yourself.” His smile becomes bittersweet. “Sometimes it takes outside forces to prompt that honesty, and it can be uncomfortable to confront. But you end up better in the long run.”

Dazai swallows roughly, unsure how to respond. It sounds trivial to compare his struggles in music to everything Odasaku has been through.

“And I know you,” says Oda, tone turning less heavy. “I know you’re going to figure this out. You love music too much not to.”

Dazai blinks in surprise. He doesn’t usually think of music as something he loves, he doesn’t feel the same way about it like Chuuya or Atsushi does. But he has revolved his entire life around it, there is nothing he’d rather do. Music had helped to fill the emptiness when he’d had little else.

Dazai smiles softly, taking another bite of curry. He forgets how well Oda actually knows him sometimes. He doesn't surround himself with people who can see through his facades very often. "Thanks, Odasaku."

"I'm just telling the truth," says Oda lightly. He gives Dazai a long look then. "It also isn't like you to fight with Nakahara in the press."

Dazai's bite goes down roughly. "It was a momentary lapse of judgement," says Dazai lowly. He'd said along the same lines whenever Oda had brought it up over the phone. He's much less easy to divert in person though.

"I've never really heard you talk about him much except the night you showed up at The Lupin and declared the death of Double Black," says Oda, frowning and crossing his arms. "You got very drunk and talked about everything you hated about him for a very long time. Then when you finished you said he was the slug of your life, wouldn't talk anymore, and I had to take you home."

Dazai blanches. "It was just you and Ango there that night, right?" It had been a long time since he'd counted Ango among those who he'd trusted with information. But luckily in this instance Ango had only been interested in destroying him professionally rather than personally.

"And the bartender," says Oda. He looks at Dazai expectantly.

"What do you want me to say?" he asks Oda, already feeling rung out from this conversation.

"You don't have to say anything," says Oda, sighing lightly. "I just wish you'd talk to people when you were upset. I know it's hard for you, but I just wish I could do something to help."

"You always help me when I'm struggling," says Dazai, affronted that Oda would think otherwise.

"When you let me," says Oda, tone sad in a way that makes Dazai's chest pang.

"It's not an easy thing to talk about," Dazai forces himself to say, though the words feel stuck in his throat. "And it's all resolved anyway. PMR and the ADA smoothed things over."

"I read the article," says Oda, shaking his head. "I highly doubt that's the whole story."

"It's going to be," says Dazai, voice a little rough. "We both agreed to no longer speak about the other in public."

Oda's expression grows more troubled. "Oh," he says heavily.

"So it's not an issue anymore," says Dazai, not sure if he's lying or not even. He certainly wishes it were true. "I appreciate the concern, Odasaku. But it's not necessary."

"If you say so," says Oda, voice still slightly skeptical. He adjusts in his seat. "I popped in to see Santoka when I was at the station. He mentioned you hadn't been over for dinner in a while."

“I’ve been busy,” says Dazai, the excuse sounding weak to his own ears. He’d been putting off the man’s invitations for weeks now.

“You should give him a call,” says Oda, more of a command than a suggestion.

“I will,” promises Dazai, smiling despite the prick of annoyance. He feels genuinely at ease for the first time in a long time. It’s hard to remain melancholic when the people who care about you badger you like this. “I have to return some books of his anyway.”

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## **December, A Month and A Half Until the Release of Arahabaki**

“I just don’t get why they’re so obsessed with high school,” says Lucy, shaking her head. She gestures with the hand holding her soda. “I would have given anything not to have to finish high school. I never had the right clothes, the right interests, the right things to say, the right anything.” She pauses to take a sip of her drink. “The only thing I could do was sing, and people just called me a show off.”

“I stopped going when I was thirteen,” says Chuuya with a shrug. He pops a couple fries in his mouth. “Never really saw the appeal. I was always more interested in music.”

They’re sitting in Kouyou’s office, eating crappy fast food while he’s taking a break from recording. He’d been craving a burger after singing all day (he tended to forget to eat while he was too into the music) and she’d texted him complaining about waiting around for Kouyou. So he’d grabbed them both food and now they were very carefully eating it on Kouyou’s coffee table.

“But they both love it,” says Lucy, wrinkling her eyebrows in confusion. “I mean, Kyouka gave up *her career* for it. It’s insane.”

“She had her reasons,” says Chuuya mildly, giving Lucy his *you’re being unpleasant* look.

“I know, I know,” says Lucy with a huff. She takes a bite of her burger, frowning at it as she chews. “It’s just hard for me to understand. I wasn’t under the impression American kids were any nicer in high school. From all the shows I’ve watched, them seem even worse.”

“I always forget you’re Canadian,” says Chuuya, smirking a little. “You’re much more subtle about it than Higuchi.”

Lucy rolls her eyes. “I was instructed to be,” she says with a scowl. “Francis made me take extensive accent neutralization lessons.”

“That does seem like something he would do,” says Chuuya, shaking his head. He has to fight off a snort when he pictures Lucy having to possibly do stage training with The Count in the future. He wonders if it will be better or worse if he warns her or not.

“How’s recording going?” asks Lucy, raising an eyebrow. “You going to meet your crazy deadline?”

“It’s going just fine,” says Chuuya, laughing a little. He’d been pushing his voice pretty hard, but he’d been really careful about resting it and drinking gallons of tea. This meal is one of the first real breaks he’s taken. “How’s *your* album coming along?”

Lucy immediately starts scowling. “Did you hear about Mori’s latest idea?”

“I haven’t,” says Chuuya, a little pissed at being out of the loop. He knows he’s busy, but still.

“He wants me to do a duet with Ryuunosuke Akutagawa,” says Lucy, revulsion clear in her voice. It grows worse as Chuuya starts laughing.

“He’s really not that bad,” says Chuuya, still laughing a little.

“Are you trying to say deep down he’s a kind and gentle person?” Lucy asks skeptically.

Chuuya snorts. “No,” he says adamantly. “But the guy is serious about music. He’s one of the most talented people I know. I bet you could learn from each other.”

Lucy makes a disgusted face at the prospect. She keeps scowling as the door to the office opens, and Chuuya winces at the look Kouyou is giving them.

“What are you two doing in *my* office?” asks Kouyou as she walks towards them, eyeing their food with displeasure.

“Taking a break?” offers Chuuya weakly, aware Kouyou is not going to be placated. Lucy gives him an unimpressed look for his efforts.

Kouyou shakes her head and moves towards her desk. “Just clean up when you’re done.” She looks over her shoulder at Lucy. “How’s that song coming along?”

“Slowly,” says Lucy with a frown, obviously frustrated.

“Need help?” asks Chuuya, finishing off the last of his burger.

“This is *my* album,” says Lucy haughtily. “I don’t need you to hold my hand.” She scowls at him. “Shouldn’t you be trying to come up for a title for yours?”

Chuuya scowls back. “It’ll come to me,” he says with a confidence he doesn’t feel.

“I might have liked it better when you two didn’t get along,” says Kouyou from her desk. She doesn’t look up from her paperwork.

“Those are bygone days,” says Lucy, smirking a little. “And I heard you tell Hirotsu you think we’re *good influences* on each other.”

Chuuya is barely listening though, going over what she’d just said. He smiles and shakes his head. “Bygone days,” he says out loud, testing it. He looks up to see both of them watching him. “Not a bad album title, is it?” That’s what most of his songs are about, things from his past he’s finally getting the chance to write about.

“I like it,” says Kouyou thoughtfully. “Though Mori would probably accept anything at this point in order to be able to start printing albums.”

“You’re just going to steal my words without asking permission?” asks Lucy, smirking fully. Chuuya rolls his eyes. She shrugs and says in a falsely kind voice, “That’s okay, you need it more than I do.”

Chuuya risks the wrath of Kouyou and throws what’s left of his fries at her.

Things had been better for Dazai since Odasaku’s visit a couple weeks ago, although not much had really changed. Dazai still isn’t sure what type of music he wants to write, but he’d believed Oda that he would figure it out. Oda’s confidence in him had helped him more than he could say.

Dazai has backed off from his relentless songwriting. He’s been over at Santoka’s several times for dinner, picking up different books each time. He also has been trying to learn how to play the bells as a new distraction (though his neighbors are not as excited about it.)

Dazai is still writing, of course. He and Atsushi are still collaborating on his album, tentatively named Stray Dogs. He writes a little bit with Kyouka when she asks him to. She’s started to offer him tea whenever they write together. Dazai has not changed his opinion on grass water, but he does appreciate the gesture (and he feels too bad to say no and keeps having to dump it out when she’s not looking.)

Kunikida has also bounced some of his ideas for his album off of Dazai. Dazai sincerely thinks it’s going to be good, Kunikida has never wavered in his style. Dazai admires him for it. Kunikida hasn’t asked him again about writing an album of his own, so Dazai is safe from that line of conversation for a while.

Dazai is currently reading his latest book from Santoka, Mountain Tasting, while in the music room with Atsushi. He’s trying a new strategy of being less involved in Atsushi’s writing, more like how he helps Kunikida. He had hoped it would lead to Atsushi flourishing out of his rut (which Dazai is not sure he’s aware that he’s in.)

Unfortunately, Atsushi just seems to work much slower than better on his own. He also seems slightly dejected about Dazai taking a less active role. He hasn’t actually complained, but his facial expressions have been less kind than usual.

“Are you at a good stopping point?” asks Atsushi, voice just a touch passive aggressive.

Dazai has to fight not to raise an eyebrow. Perhaps a little frustration would push Atsushi where he needed to be. Though he doesn’t want to make him miserable, Akutagawa had



never grown that way. Dazai places his bookmark on the page he's on and sets his book down, smiling at Atsushi lightly.

"How's it going?" he asks, serene tone contrasting with Atsushi's.

"Fine," says Atsushi, which is clearly a lie. "Just having some trouble with the chorus."

"I'm sure you'll figure it out," says Dazai, smiling and pulling out his phone to check his email. "What in particular are you struggling with?"

"Did I...did I do something?" asks Atsushi, actual hurt in his voice making Dazai set his phone down immediately.

"What do you mean?" asks Dazai, frowning deeply.

"These past couple weeks, it's like you've given up on the album," says Atsushi, looking down at the table instead of at Dazai. "So I wondered if I had done something wrong." His voice trails off awkwardly.

Dazai takes a deep breath. *This* isn't what he'd wanted. Perhaps Oda's advice wouldn't just be useful for himself. Maybe he needed to confront Atsushi about things in order to prompt Atsushi to recognize the problem. It just went against Dazai's instincts, he'd been trying so hard since he'd met him to make Atsushi believe in himself.

But if he truly thinks of Atsushi as a friend he should want to help him grow as an artist, not just keep him happy.

"You haven't done anything wrong," clarifies Dazai first, because it's important. "I hoped that if I left you to your own devices your songwriting would evolve." He tries to make his tone as neutral as possible.

"Evolve," repeats Atsushi, frowning with his eyebrows furrowed. "Do you think the songs I'm writing now are unevolved?"

"Not all of them," says Dazai. He quickly regrets it at the face Atsushi makes, both wounded and angry. Well, there go his plans to try to ease into the subject delicately.

"Not all of them?" repeats Atsushi again, his voice much less calm this time. "And you just weren't going to say anything?" he demands.

"I'm saying something now," Dazai points out, which does not seem to help based on how Atsushi's frown gets even deeper. Dazai sighs. "I'd hoped it was just growing pains. I didn't want to shake your confidence if it turned out to be a nonissue."

"What's the problem?" asks Atsushi, clearing trying to keep a steady tone. "What's wrong with the songs I've written?"

"Not every song," Dazai reminds him. Atsushi just keeps watching him expectantly. Dazai sighs. "Some of the lyrics you've been writing have lacked the authenticity I know you're capable of."

*“Authenticity?”* Atsushi’s voice is incredulous. “I’m writing about my life, my experiences. How can that be inauthentic?” He’s practically shouting now.

“It’s inauthentic when you dance around the subjects lightly and without originality,” says Dazai, giving up on not being blunt. “If you want to write about your experiences, you have to commit to being vulnerable, not do things halfway. If you don’t, people won’t connect to it.”

“What would you know about it?” asks Atsushi, and if looks could injure people Dazai would have been burned from the vitriol in his gaze. “I don’t see you writing songs about your personal tragedies.” He stands up from his chair, openly yelling now. “I haven’t seen you write a single word about why you left Port Mafia Records, or why you wear those bandages, or that face you make whenever someone so much as breathes the name Chuuya Nakahara.” Atsushi points a finger at him in accusation. “But you expect others to do it like it’s easy.”

Atsushi’s words hit like strikes from a knife. Dazai doesn’t even know how to begin to respond. He doesn’t get the chance though, Atsushi shoots him one last glare and storms out of the room, the door slamming behind him as he goes.

Dazai looks at the door, then puts his head in his hands in regret. Every time he truly attempts to help someone he cares about it backfires spectacularly. Not to mention how much Atsushi’s barbs reminded him of the one’s he’d been trying so hard to push away from August.

But the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. Dazai isn’t going to keep making the same mistakes he has in the past. He pushes away the pain and goes to look for Atsushi, determined to make this right.

It’s sunset by the time he tracks Atsushi down, sitting on the beach near where he’d first met him. There are a couple people around enjoying the weather, but Atsushi is alone, sitting in the sand and staring at the ocean. Dazai feels another twinge of pain at how much the image reminds him of the past, but he pushes through it to approach Atsushi.

“Do you mind if I take a seat?” asks Dazai quietly when he reaches him, not making any attempts to put on any kind of act.

“Sure,” says Atsushi just as quietly. He doesn’t look away from the waves.

Dazai sits down next to him, turning to face the water as well. It truly is a beautiful sight. Even in a place with so much personal baggage, Dazai can appreciate that.

“You just missed Lucy,” says Atsushi, surprising him by speaking first. His tone is much calmer than when they’d spoken last.

Dazai hums in acknowledgement, ready to accept whatever admonishments Atsushi will give him. Dazai doesn’t deny his own hypocrisy in the situation. But he doesn’t want Atsushi to end up like him, with all these doubts. If that involves Atsushi needing to yell at him, so be it.

“I asked her to meet me,” continues Atsushi, running his right hand through the sand. “I wanted to ask her how it was so easy for her to write about her past, why she didn’t struggle at all.”

“What did she say?” asks Dazai, actually curious about her answer.

Atsushi laughs a little. “She got angry and said it wasn’t easy for her. But she said she didn’t have any other option, that shoving away those feelings didn’t make them go away.” He turns to face Dazai, just the hint of a smile visible.

“Not a bad perspective,” says Dazai honestly, smiling lightly back. Then he says more seriously, “But it was wrong of me to ambush you like that. And cruel.”

Atsushi surprises him by laughing again. “She also had an opinion about that. She said you were obviously trying to help me, so I had no business throwing a tantrum.”

“I wouldn’t call it a tantrum,” says Dazai, still unsure why Atsushi thinks of this girl as nice. She seems to connect with Atsushi though, he clearly values her perspective.

“I think I can see what you mean,” says Atsushi, frowning at his hands. “About my music. I wasn’t consciously playing it safe, but I wasn’t putting in everything either.” He sits up a little, looking Dazai in the eyes. “I *want* to write music that’s real, that could help people in situations like I was, to make them feel less alone. That’s why I got into music.” He smiles sadly. “But I can’t do that without being completely authentic.”

“I could have worded that much more kindly,” says Dazai, both annoyed with himself and immensely proud at Atsushi’s words. He truly is a remarkable person. Dazai is grateful he’s such a terrible robber.

“I would have gotten angry no matter how you said it,” says Atsushi, shaking his head. He frowns slightly. “Although you could have mentioned it earlier.”

“I didn’t know how,” says Dazai with a small shrug. “I didn’t want to you to think I don’t think you’re a good songwriter. It’s *because* I think that you’re a good songwriter that I was frustrated.”

“I know that I was in a pretty rough place when we met,” says Atsushi, meeting Dazai’s gaze with a solemn expression. “And I’ve thanked you a million times for helping me out then. But I’m not fragile. I can handle criticism. I *need* it, especially from you.” Atsushi grins at him. “Even if you’re kind of rude about it.”

“I’ll work on it,” promises Dazai, smiling back.

“It’s a deal,” says Atsushi warmly.

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## **Bygone Days, Chuuya Nakahara**

1. *Songs of Sky and Ocean*
2. *Tales of Baby Red and The Lemon Fucker (To Marseilles With Love)*
3. *A Shadow of a Hat Lightly Dances*
4. *Sorrow Already Spoiled*
5. *Ane-san*
6. *Phantasm*
7. *Be Cautious of Blood Relatives, They Can Be Deleterious to Your Health*
8. *Port Mafia Black (feat. The Black Lizards)*
9. *Exhaustion*
10. *Real Friends Are Willing To Destroy Your Kitchen With You*
11. *The Moon Awaits Her Executioner*
12. *I’m Not Allowed To Comment on Ongoing Port Mafia Records Legal Disputes, But-*
13. *Arahabaki*

## **January 25, Three Hours Since the Release of Arahabaki**

Dazai is slightly out of breath as he reaches the building Chuuya lives in, ignoring the weird twinge of nostalgia he gets as he approaches it. It feels off to head towards the elevator instead of the stairs to the third floor, but Dazai doesn’t have time to get sentimental now. He’s already too full of emotions, he doesn’t have room for anymore. Dazai’s anxiety has only risen the closer he’s gotten to his destination, his hands tremble slightly as he rides the elevator to the top floor.

He fights to keep them steady as he punches in the code Kouyou had given him, resolving to go in without warning and confront whatever reception he’s met with. Nothing matters right now except Chuuya and whether he’s alright. Everything else is insignificant.

Dazai’s throat tightens as he enters the apartment though. The layout is similar to how Chuuya’s old dorm had been. Though the living area is large enough to fit his piano now. But it’s still full of familiar sights: Chuuya’s CDs haphazardly spread out, his extravagant tea kettle. The couch looks like the same one.

He hadn’t been aware until this moment how much it was possible to miss a location.

It’s the white board in the middle of the room that catches his gaze the most though. Dazai starts walking towards it almost absentmindedly, taking in the abbreviated tracklist and a truly large number of crossed out potential album titles. They almost take up the whole board. He leans closer to try and read them.

“Lucy actually ended up picking the album title,” says Chuuya, making him jump embarrassingly hard in shock.

Dazai turns towards him so quickly his neck aches slightly. Chuuya is leaning against the wall next to the hallway that leads further into the apartment, watching Dazai carefully.

It's been a long time since Dazai has seen him in person in something other than a suit. He's dressed in a baggy red sweatshirt and grey sweatpants, his red hair drawn back in a messy ponytail.

Dazai's grand plans of what he was going to say start slipping away at the sight of him, his heart hammering rapidly. He swallows roughly, trying to get ahold of himself. It's hard with Chuuya looking at him.

Dazai looks for any evidence of Chuuya being distressed, but Chuuya's expression is calm. It's unexpected after how absolutely livid Chuuya had been the last time they'd spoken. But he's completely at ease as he looks at Dazai.

"What are you doing here?" asks Chuuya. It's not spoken like an accusation, it's a genuine question.

"You once told me you'd rather bash your brains in than hear *Arahabaki* on the radio," says Dazai, words coming out normally somehow.

Dazai half expects Chuuya to get angry or defensive. Neither of those things happen though, instead Chuuya's expression shifts rapidly between several different ones before settling on something neutral. For a second Dazai almost swears he looks disappointed.

Chuuya sighs lightly and crosses his arms. "I said that when I was *sixteen*." His lips lift in a hint of a smile. "I'm fine."

Out of all the scenarios Dazai had expected, Chuuya being completely unaffected had not been one of them. He scrambles for what to say. He has a million snippets of things he should say, but he has no idea how to start.

Chuuya's phone goes off, and Chuuya frowns as he checks it. Dazai kind of still can't believe this interaction is happening, his pulse hasn't slowed at all. It's making it hard to think.

Chuuya shoves his phone back into his sweatshirt, looking up at Dazai with another strange expression. "Honestly, I'm fine," says Chuuya, tone hard to understand. "If you're just here to check up on me, you can go."

Dazai doesn't want to go, he realizes abruptly. This feels like the first time he's actually spoken to Chuuya since he'd been eighteen. He doesn't want to lose it. Dazai has been outraged with him since August, but none of that rage feels important right now.

Chuuya surprises him again though by walking towards the kitchen, ignoring Dazai's presence to turn on his kettle. He looks over at Dazai again, face still hard to read. "I'm actually heading out soon. Doing a livestream later."

Dazai has no idea what the fuck to do with that. "Oh," he says dumbly. "Right."

Chuuya sighs then, his calmness slipping a little for annoyance. "So I need you to leave," he says with a hint of exasperation.

“Right,” repeats Dazai, nodding. He turns to leave, walking towards the door. He looks over his shoulder as he goes and meets Chuuya’s eyes. He still has no idea what his expression means.

Chuuya looks away first though, going to grab a mug and muttering under his breath. Dazai walks out the door, letting it close behind him awkwardly.

Nothing about the encounter makes more sense as he gets further away. Dazai doesn’t even know what he’s feeling, other than unsettled. He pulls his phone out of his pocket, finally glancing at the many, many text messages his coworkers have sent him since he’d left.

Dazai frowns at them as he starts making his way back to the ADA, his scowl only getting deeper as he walks.

*What in the actual hell had just happened?* he thinks to himself, more puzzled than he’s ever been in his entire life.

Chuuya is having a strange day. Release days have always made him nervous, and that had never faded, not with age or experience. This one is weird for reasons that have nothing to do with music though.

Chuuya had spent longer than he’d like to admit thinking about what Dazai’s reaction would be to the song he’d written about him. He’d imagined many different scenarios. He’d pictured Dazai being angry, mocking him, the cruelest of rejections. In none of those scenarios had *Dazai not even acknowledged the song and asked him if he was doing okay.*

Chuuya doesn’t even have the time to figure out how he feels about any of it. He’d taken the morning off to rest up for the livestream of the album he’s doing this afternoon. Now he has to go into the office and sing his entire album and try not to spend the entire time thinking about Dazai and what the fuck that had just been.

He sighs and shakes his head. This whole mess would have to wait. Chuuya has way more important things to think about today. Despite his mind-boggling encounter with Dazai, he *had* released an album today.

The reception is better than anything he’d expected. It’s like Double Black but a thousand times as frenzied. His social media accounts are pretty much frozen with the number of messages and comments he’s getting. He’s trending on everything, and Bygone Days is already selling a staggering amount of copies.

Chuuya can’t help from grinning like an idiot as he walks towards the office. He’d dreaded and anticipated this day for so long, and it’s everything he’d ever wanted on the music end. A

bunch of his songs have emerged as favorites, but most of the buzz has been about *Arahabaki*.

Unlike with *Corruption*, Chuuya doesn't have to force himself to accept the compliments. It honestly feels good, having people listen to his closest guarded secrets. He knows now there isn't going to be an event that will make him feel human, but he feels anything but hollow as he reads people's words about how much they love the song.

No matter what else happens with Dazai, Chuuya has that. He'll deal with the rest later. Right now he's got a show to put on.

Dazai isn't sure how long it takes him to get back to the ADA, the only thing he is sure of is how entirely unsure he is about everything. He had set out to have an explosive confrontation, prepared to apologize and ask for forgiveness. Instead he'd been met with nonchalance and borderline *politeness*.

Chuuya had never been *polite* to him in a single interaction they had ever had.

It just doesn't make sense. Dazai knows they haven't spent a great deal of time together these past four, almost five years now. But when he had interacted with Chuuya lately he'd been the same. There had been some changes, looks and Chuuya being more grounded in himself, but nothing of this scale.

Dazai resolves to try and figure it out when it gets home. He makes his expression into a semblance of something normal as he opens to the door to the office. It's a little more difficult than usual.

The first thing that Dazai notices as he walks in is that Kunikida has brought out the war table again. The second thing is that everyone is starting at him.

His expression becomes even harder to maintain. But Dazai had been taught by the best.

"The prodigal son returns," calls out Ranpo from his spot at the end of the table. Yosano snickers a little.

Kunikida shoots them both a disappointed look then turns to give Dazai an even more disappointed one. "We've been trying to contact you."

"Sorry, something came up," says Dazai lightly. He moves towards the table, taking in the others' expressions. Atsushi in particular looks very concerned. Kyouka's face is carefully blank. Tanizaki looks mostly uncomfortable.

Kunikida sighs deeply, adjusting his glasses in obvious irritation. “Well, you’re here now. Take a seat.”

Dazai sits in the only open chair across from Atsushi. Kenji is next to him, though he’s staring at his phone. Dazai realizes he has wireless headphones in and isn’t paying attention.

Kunikida seems to notice at the same moment. “Kenji,” he says loudly, snapping his fingers.

Kenji pulls out one of his earbuds, a confused look on his face. “Something wrong?”

“We’re in the middle of an important discussion,” says Kunikida, frowning at him.

Kenji blinks innocently. “Kyouka is watching it too.”

Kyouka scowls at Kenji, pulling out a headphone too. “Chuuya is doing a livestream of his album,” she says, putting her phone that had been on her lap on the table.

“And you’ve been watching it without us?” asks Ranpo with a pout. He rushes towards the hallway. “Let me get the big screen!”

“Do not get the big screen,” commands Kunikida, which Ranpo ignores. He sighs and rubs his forehead as Ranpo wheels the television into the room, huffing slightly from the exertion.

“This is all unnecessary anyway,” says Dazai, voice slightly patronizing.

Kunikida stops glaring at Ranpo to glare at Dazai. “It very much is,” he says strongly. “We need a comprehensive strategy about our response. The phones have already been ringing off the hook asking for a comment. I don’t want a repeat of last time.”

Dazai rolls his eyes but doesn’t argue further.

Ranpo finally gets the television working and Chuuya’s face appears on the screen. He’s changed from earlier, now in black jeans and a gray t-shirt. It takes Dazai a moment to notice his hat is missing, which adds another incomprehensible piece to the puzzle.

“Turn that off,” snaps Kunikida.

“This is research,” claims Ranpo innocently. He turns the volume down low for the moment. “Know thy enemy and all that.”

“Chuuya Nakahara is not our enemy,” says Kunikida, looking like he might actually strangle him.

“I vote we watch it,” says Kenji cheerfully. “It’s almost over anyway.”

Kunikida sighs, putting his head in his hands. He seems to give up on trying to change their minds though.

“What did we miss?” Yosano asks Kenji and Kyouka.



“He just sang *The Moon Awaits Her Executioner*,” says Kyouka. She’s obviously trying not to smile.

“He sang *Port Mafia Black* with The Black Lizards earlier,” says Kenji excitedly. “*I still bleed, Port Mafia black*,” sings Kenji enthusiastically.

Atsushi frowns at them. “Maybe Dazai doesn’t want to watch this.” He gives Dazai another concerned look.

“I don’t mind,” says Dazai dismissively. His day is already profoundly suboptimal. “It’s not like I haven’t heard Chuuya sing a thousand times.”

“He wasn’t singing a song about you,” points out Yosano, voice a little kinder than before.

“How bad can it be?” asks Dazai nonchalantly with a shrug.

The room suddenly goes silent. Everyone is staring at him again.

“You mean you haven’t listened to it yet?” asks Atsushi, voice a touch frantic.

“I’ve been a little busy,” says Dazai, frowning despite himself.

The song had honestly been the lowest thing on his list of priorities. He’d been aware of it in the back of his mind, but Chuuya and *Arahabaki* had taken precedent. Then he’d been too shook up about his strange meeting with Chuuya to give it much thought.

Besides, Chuuya sharing in song form how much he detests him isn’t something he’d really been looking forward to hearing.

“Perhaps you’d like to hear it alone first,” suggests Kunikida, still looking at Dazai with wide eyes.

“He’s about to sing it,” says Kyouka, also looking at Dazai a little warily.

“I’d rather just get it over with,” says Dazai. He signals to Ranpo to turn up the volume. Ranpo does, though he looks a little hesitant about it.

Chuuya is sitting at the piano, looking as natural as he always does. The camera is focused mostly on him, though there are various musicians in the background that Dazai might recognize if had a better view.

Chuuya is smiling, adjusting his mic a little. “I feel this next song needs very little introduction,” says Chuuya. There’s a hint of a smirk on his face. “It’s called *I’m Not Allowed To Comment on Ongoing Port Mafia Records’ Legal Disputes, But-*.”

Dazai raises an eyebrow at the title, unsure whether he should find it funny or annoying.

“This one’s for you, mackerel,” says Chuuya wryly, winking at the camera.

Dazai blinks, fighting to keep his face blank.

“Did he just call Dazai a fish?” whispers Kenji. He quickly gets shushed and Ranpo turns up the volume further.

Chuuya starts playing the piano, the notes loud and strong. The sound of the drums and guitar join in, setting a uptempo beat. Chuuya keeps playing the keys as he starts the first verse, voice as devastatingly perfect as always.

*“I used to think you took music with you when you left,”* sings Chuuya, the words coming out a touch acerbic. *“I did not write, I did not play for an age.”*

Dazai is hit with the conundrum that this song is possibly going to be catchy and follow him for the rest of his life as Chuuya continues.

*And I used to not see the point to love songs*

*But I guess it's time for me to wave the white flag*

Dazai is distracted from dissecting that line by the tempo ramping up as Chuuya keeps singing.

*And sometimes people ask me*

*If we shared a bed*

*As if that's more intimate than a stage*

*But people always ask me*

*What I think of you*

*So I'm finally taking the chance to say*

Chuuya drags out the last word before launching into the next lines with gusto, smile clear on his face.

*You're a bitch, You're a bastard*

*You're the biggest asshole I've ever met*

*You're a dick, You're a liar*

*The only thing you're good for is regret*

Dazai is aware the others are all looking at him, but he doesn't have the mental capacity to consider their feelings at this moment. He's too fixated on Chuuya singing about how awful he is with such glee.

Then the song changes abruptly, the other instruments fading away as Chuuya plays the piano more gently. *"But I'm the fool,"* sings Chuuya, voice soft to match the piano. *"I'm the idiot. Because half the songs I write still start out as duets."*

**Oh no**, thinks Dazai faintly to himself as his life is once again turned upside all over two lines.

Chuuya continues playing with his more sincere and earnest tone, the jarring switch of the genre somehow working with his expertise.

*Because I can't really hate you for leaving*

*When I never asked you to stay*

*I'm so fucking sick of all the lies*

*And only reaching for the cruelest things to say*

*Because my real problem with your music*

*Has nothing to do with the quality of the songs*

*It's really because deep down I know*

*I wish I were there singing along*

*To me you're just like the ocean*

*A force of nature that can't be denied*

*Fifty different people in one body*

*Without which I would not have survived*

*“And whenever people always ask me, what am I looking for,”* sings Chuuya, belting out the last note. Then his voice gets quieter. *“The answer never changes, it cannot be ignored.”* His tone is almost wistful. *“I just want someone who gets what my music is about. You’re still the only one.”*

He shifts to playing and singing louder again with the next lines.

*So I guess the main thing that I’m trying to say*

*Is that despite all the taunts, all the fights, all those hopeless sleepless nights*

*Is that you are the absolute worst, but I love you anyway*

He sings the last line a cappella, voice ringing out flawlessly. Then he plays a short little ditty and adds with a smirk, *“And that I haven’t peaked, fucker.”*

You could hear a pin drop in the room. There are a multitude of expressions on his coworkers faces.

Then Dazai starts laughing hysterically (it’s still the preferred option between that, sobbing or screaming.)

Because Chuuya loves him. Chuuya *loves* him. *Chuuya loves him.*

The person who Dazai had sworn he could never have at sixteen, the person he’d concluded at eighteen he’d lost forever, is in *love* with him.

*Chuuya loves him back.*

And Dazai *had gone to his apartment to ask if he was okay.* Without acknowledging it at all. No wonder Chuuya had looked at him like that. It had been possibly the strangest unintentional rejection of all time.

The universe has to be playing the longest running joke on him. It’s too much. Can he really just never catch a fucking break? Isn’t seven years of waiting long enough?

It is possible some of the tears leaking from his eyes aren’t just from the laughter. He’s not even sure if they’re tears of sadness or tears of overwhelming relief. *Chuuya Nakahara loves him.* Dazai feels like he could burst from the knowledge, the scarring over of a wound he’d carried for all this time.

Dazai tries to catch his breath, aware that his coworkers are still staring at him. He’s surprised when he looks up to see what looks like anger on Atsushi’s face though.

“Is that last line in the released version?” asks Dazai, still laughing.

“Yes it is,” says Kyouka quickly, frowning at him. Her eyes flick back to the screen. “He’s about to sing *Arahabaki*.”

Dazai’s laughter vanishes immediately. He’d almost forgotten with how sharp his relief had been. But his stomach is in knots as he turns to listen to the one song in the world he hates more than *Corruption*.

“This last song is both easy and difficult to explain,” says Chuuya, setting down a water bottle he’d been drinking from on top of the piano. He runs a hand through his hair. “It’s partly about a god of destruction.” He shrugs, almost smiling. “It’s also about me.”

The other instruments are gone, and Chuuya is by himself as he plays the piano. Dazai feels goosebumps at the eerily familiar melody, one he hadn’t been aware how well he’d remembered. He struggles to swallow as he watches Chuuya jump into the first verse, tone distinctly different than the last song. Any lightness has faded for wrath and resentment.

*The true nature of your existence*

*Is something you’ve always known*

*You may look just like a human*

*But creatures like you are meant to be alone*

Chuuya grows even louder as he sings the chorus, voice filled with hatred and turmoil.

*You know that you’re-*

*A god of calamity*

*Everything you touch, you destroy*

*Nothing will escape you*

*Arahabaki, Arahabaki, Arahabaki*

He sings quieter again, but with no less anguish.

*What does it mean to be human?*

*Did you trick them into thinking you’re human?*

*Why even bother trying to be a human?*

*It isn't something you deserve*

Dazai digs his nails into his palms as he listens, once again finding it unfathomable how Chuuya could have looked so nonplussed this morning. If Chuuya had been putting on an act, Dazai is going to scream at him until he loses his voice.

But Chuuya keeps playing without any of the signs of distress that Dazai remembers from *Corruption*. There's no hesitation or unease as he continues with the next verse.

*Time flows on and you keep pretending*

*Those you love you deceive*

*Though you may play at being human*

*You know it's something you will never achieve*

*But deep down you don't want to be-*

*A god of calamity*

*But everything I touch, I destroy*

*Nothing will escape me*

*Arahabaki, Arahabaki, Arahabaki*

"What does it mean to be human?" sings Chuuya softly, voice just audible over the piano, "I can't seem to figure it out." The anger is gone, replaced by despair. "This has to be a nightmare. I have to wake up somehow."

Chuuya keeps playing the piano, the notes light and miserable. Eventually he lets it fade until there's nothing.

"No," sings Chuuya, voice almost a whisper. "No. No. No." His voice builds with each word, voice strong. "Oh expectations, stale and dismal airs," he sings like a declaration, "Leave this body of mine!"

He launches into the final chorus, playing and singing emphatically.

*I am not-*

*A god of calamity*

*I can create, not just destroy*

*I will escape from this nightmare*

*No longer Arahabaki, Arahabaki, Arahabaki*

*What does it mean to be human?*

*I think I'm going to try to be human*

*Even if it kills me I'll die a human*

*At least I won't die alone*

He stands up from the piano, grabbing the microphone and singing the last lines a cappella.

*Oh grantors of dark disgrace*

*I have awoken for good*

Chuuya smiles as he finishes, and that is the final straw for Dazai who had been making a colossal effort to keep it together up to this point.

Dazai stands up abruptly from his chair. "If you'll excuse me for a moment," he says thickly, aware that there is no possibility of him hiding the tears gathering in his eyes.

He quickly walks out the door before anyone can say anything else.

By the time Dazai returns from the bathroom, Atsushi and Ranpo are the only ones left in the room. He suspects the others have gone home based on how the sun is no longer out. He approaches them with a light smile.

“Dazai,” says Atsushi, sitting up with a jerk as he notices him. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” says Dazai. He’s aware it probably sounds like a lie, but he actually means it for once. His red-rimmed eyes and messy hair probably make him less believable though. “Did Kunikida say anything before he left?”

“Not really,” says Ranpo with a shrug. “He seemed pretty freaked out by you crying.”

Dazai nods, taking a seat on top of the table. It’s a reasonable reaction. Dazai is more than slightly uncomfortable that everyone had seen him cry too. Not crying hadn’t been an option though, not after that.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” asks Atsushi again. He’s frowning at him.

“Yes,” says Dazai plainly, meeting Atsushi’s gaze. “I was just caught off guard.”

Atsushi’s frown doesn’t go away though. “Kunikida is still going to want to know how you want to respond to the song. The one about you.”

“Yes, I suppose he will,” says Dazai, not able to hold back a smile and a small snicker.

Dazai is surprised when Atsushi lets out a scoff and gets up from the table, walking towards his desk in irritation.

“Something wrong?” Dazai asks him, glancing to Ranpo to see if he knows what’s going on. Ranpo just raises both his eyebrows.

“It’s a little cruel, don’t you think?” asks Atsushi, spinning around to face them, practically glowering at Dazai. “Even if you don’t feel the same way, it took courage to be that vulnerable. I thought you’d understand that.”

Dazai sighs and pulls out his phone, tapping the screen quickly to send a message. He looks up again at Atsushi when he finishes.

“Don’t ignore what I’m trying to- *did you just send me an email?*” Atsushi demands in outrage, scowling at his phone. His eyes narrow as he sees the attachment. “What is this?”

“It’s the song I wrote about how I feel about Chuuya,” says Dazai matter of factly.

Atsushi looks from him to his phone and back again. “When did you write this?”

“While I was in the bathroom,” answers Dazai easily, smiling lightly.

“I thought you were in there crying,” says Atsushi, looking slightly bewildered.

“It’s called multitasking,” says Dazai flippantly, waving a hand dismissively. Ranpo snorts from beside him.

Atsushi is looking at his phone again, expression getting even more perplexed. “This is..you-.” He shakes his head and looks up at Dazai. “This is how you feel?”



“Yup,” says Dazai cheerfully, smile growing bigger.

Atsushi stares at him for a moment. “So you’re going to share this with him?”

“Oh, no,” says Dazai quickly, shaking his head. “Definitely not.”

“*Why?*” Atsushi looks like he’s about to throw his phone at him.

“Eh, he’s too short for me,” says Dazai with a shrug, fighting not to smirk.

Atsushi sputters at him, too upset to form words. Then he throws up his hands and walks towards the door. He gives Dazai one last incensed look as he goes.

“You shouldn’t involve the kid in your schemes like that,” says Ranpo. He’s smiling too though.

“It’s necessary,” says Dazai. He knows he’d resolved not to manipulate his coworkers, Atsushi in particular. But frankly he’d do much worse when it came to Chuuya. “Plus all’s fair in war and that other thing.”

Ranpo laughs, shaking his head. “Good luck with that,” he says simply.

“You don’t seem surprised about any of this,” comments Dazai. He gives Ranpo a questioning look.

“I had my suspicions for a while,” says Ranpo, nodding, “But the clincher was *play me a song, oh play it soft and sweet.*” He says the lyrics and raises an eyebrow.

Dazai snorts. At least someone had been able to see through it. Thinking of *Play Me A Song* doesn’t ache anymore though, not like it used to. Dazai still feels jittery, full of energy. He’d woken up today thinking it was going to be awful. Chuuya had always had a habit of proving his predictions wrong.

“You know,” says Ranpo thoughtfully, “I wasn’t sure if you’d be a good fit when you started working here.” It’s factual rather than unkind. “Not because of your past with Port Mafia Records, you just gave off this vibe.” Ranpo wiggles a hand. “Now I don’t think it matters whether you’re a good fit or not, I think it matters more that you want to be.”

Dazai looks at him in surprise, a complement (or sort of complement) is a rare thing from Ranpo. He smirks at him. “You’re saying the great Edogawa Ranpo made a mistake?”

“I made a miscalculation based on the data I had at the time,” corrects Ranpo, crossing his arms. “I don’t make mistakes.”

“Of course not,” agrees Dazai easily, laughing a little. He’s emoted more this day than he thinks he has in years.

He can’t stop smiling though. Dazai isn’t used to feeling like this. It’s a mix of adrenaline and the deepest assuagement he’s ever encountered.

Dazai really needs to focus though. He's got a slug to catch.

## Chapter End Notes

come and get your love notes

- Dazai and Chuuya, renowned award winning musicians after one (1) conversation with the other: oh my god what if i'm a terrible musician
- Tachihara actually has quite the backstory that i almost never let him talk about
- me after multiple people have commented on the lack of Tanizaki: fine! fine! he can have his own mini arc god damn it
- Kyouka a thousand percent goes to the same school as Elise, they carpool
- Atsushi had Encounters™ with Akutagawa and Lucy at the fundraiser that impacted all of them that we unfortunately didn't see
- i think if you drank every time Dazai lies in this fic you would die
- shout out to Nanami\_ontheShore for making me think obsessively about how to work in happy endings for Francis and Lucy (enough for LMM to become a tagged character even)
- RL Francis's daughter was named Frances but i couldn't do that to this poor fake child. So i named her Daisy after Daisy from The Great Gatsby
- Tanizaki's songs and style obviously based on RL Tanizaki
- it was challenging and humbling to revisit some of the scenes i wrote when i first started this fic to reintegrate them back into the story
- Mori has been looking for YEARS for a way to get Chuuya to do a solo album. he cackles to himself wildly that *Dazai* was the one to hand it to him after Chuuya leaves
- it becomes more and more apparent every chapter i truly have no idea how long it takes to make an album \*shrugs\*
- the scene where Chuuya decides to write Arahaki about how he is human is the one that made me happy i wrote this fic
- Lucy isn't a bitch, she's The bitch and i love her
- me: i'm not going to write side ships in the fic. also me: blatantly promoting the TachiGin and AtsuLucy agenda
- it was not easy to track down the name of RL Atsushi's short stories i had to do some aggressive googling
- A Landscape of the Soul is by RL Kajii, In Obscurity is by RL Higuchi
- "Come grow old with me. The best is yet to be."- William Woodsworth
- Kuroiwa Ruiko was one of RL Ranpo's influences
- I honestly don't know what my fav Poe story is. they're all so good and creepy! (also Yosano bringing up Lenore is a subtle dig at Poe writing love songs about other people)
- Oda is back! and he's here to pull Dazai's head out of his ass!!
- Chuuya and Lucy's friendship is different than his with Elise or Kyouka in a fun way. chaotic angry redhead alliance

- Songs of Bygone Days is a poem by RL Chuuya (which I would have loved to make the album title if i hadn't already made one of the songs called Songs of Sky and Ocean three chapters ago)
- Mountain Tasting is by RL Taneda
- Chuuya's album includes songs about Kajii, Arthur, Kouyou, Tachihara, and RL Chuuya references (duh)
- "Once I believed love poems were foolish" -Chuuya Nakahara, Exhaustion, adapted into *And I used to not see the point to love songs*
- "O expectations, stale and dismal airs, leave this body of mine!" -Chuuya Nakahara, Sheep Song

so ends the penultimate chapter! kind of a shift from plot heavy chapters back to character centered ones, and full plot altering songs. hopefully that makes up for its brevity?

i can't promise how soon the finale will be out (holy fuck, THE FINALE). in which i will finally make up for the audacity of writing three chapters in a row with only One soukoku interaction.

one of my biggest problems writing this chapter is that all my writing playlists are fully of angsty moody songs and for once those didn't fit lol

i mean, is it really a slow burn if the characters get together before the final chapter?  
(^u^)

comments are my lifeblood. spare one if you can?

# This Song Is Every Word I Left Unspoken

## Chapter Summary

the end isn't near, it's here

## Chapter Notes

so let's see here, i'm supposed to \*reads checklist\* apologize about how long the update took, gush over the unending and unwavering support i get, joke about how long it is (22.5k baby). that about cover it?

oh! almost forgot to say chapter title is taken from lyrics from If You Can't Live Without Me, Why Aren't You Dead Yet? by Mayday Parade!!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

### January 26th, Twenty Hours Since the Release of Arahabaki

Chuuya is exhausted by the time he gets back to his apartment on the day (or day after really now) of the release of Bygone Days. Despite taking the morning off, the rest of his day had been one thing after another. He'd done the livestream, then after that it had been a ton of press. Chuuya had thought he was prepared for it after this many years of being in the industry, but he had forgotten what it was really like, the ferocity of being the center of attention like that.

It had been slightly overwhelming, but he'd also kind of liked it. It had been so long since he'd gotten to talk about music that was his and his alone. He no longer had to direct the credit towards whosever album it was, he could soak it all up himself. Even when he'd got irritated about some of the more prying questions (about one song about one person in particular), he'd never stopped smiling.

Chuuya has been making music for practically a decade now, but he'd still been slightly nervous about the release. This music is also different than anything he'd released before, it's way more personal. Even with *Corruption*, he had never felt like he was exposing himself this much.

It makes the satisfaction that people *are* connecting to it ten times as meaningful. Every time someone has told him how much they like *Arahabaki*, how they could relate to the doubts and insecurities or just the fear of deserving to be alone, Chuuya doesn't have the words to

describe how it makes him feel. Maybe there is always going to be a part of himself that will feel a little bit empty, but it's never been easier to face than it's been right now.

But unlike with Double Black and *Corruption*, *Arahabaki* isn't taking over the entire album. He'd also heard how people recognized their own losses in *A Shadow of a Hat Lightly Dances* or their own complicated relationships with family in *Be Cautious of Blood Relatives, They Can Be Deleterious to Your Health* (which he hopes reaches his mother's parents so they know just how much they can go fuck themselves).

Then there are also the songs he'd written about the people who are in his life. Kouyou had shown up before the livestream unexpectedly and marched up to him and said hotly, "How dare you not warn me about that song." Then she'd wrapped her arms around him and practically squeezed the life out of him.

"You're welcome," Chuuya had somehow gotten out even though he could barely breathe. Kouyou had been a little misty eyed as she'd pulled away, *in public*, which was a practically unheard of display of emotions from her. She'd had to get back to work shortly after, but the full smile she'd flashed at him as she went made Chuuya sure *Ane-san* had accomplished exactly what he'd wanted it to.

Tachihara on the other hand had been extremely open with his emotions about *Real Friends Are Willing to Destroy Your Kitchen With You*. He'd punched Chuuya in the arm immediately when Chuuya had approached him and Gin as they set up their instruments before the livestream so that they'd be ready to play *Port Mafia Black*. Kajii and Higuchi hadn't shown up yet.

"You asshole," Tachihara had said enthusiastically, laughing and shaking his head. Then he'd dragged Chuuya into a hug. "I love you, man."

"He cried," Gin had added, smiling at the two of them while rolling her eyes. "A lot."

"Shut up," Tachihara had said without any heat, giving Chuuya another squeeze before pulling back to hold him by the shoulders. His grin had been enormous. "I don't even know what to fucking say."

"You don't have to say anything," Chuuya had said, smiling back just as widely. "Consider it a thank you for putting up with all my shit all these years."

"It has been an honor to put up with your shit," Tachihara had declared, voice wobbling a little bit at the end. Then he had released his shoulders and shoved him away. "Get out of here. I can't even look at you right now."

Chuuya had laughed but started to walk away to get set up himself. Then he'd been surprised when Gin had pulled him into a hug too.

"It's amazing, Chuuya," she had said softly. "All of it. You should be proud."

"Thanks, Gin," he'd replied, voice catching a little himself. "That means a lot."

“Now go get ready,” Gin had said, tone back to her usual nonchalance as she let him go. “You’ve got a show to put on.”

Chuuya had rolled his eyes, waving a hand behind him as he went. He’d felt even more full of energy though as he ran through his warm ups. He’d kept finding himself smiling like an idiot.

The livestream had been a blast. Even though Chuuya greatly prefers singing it front of a real audience, getting to perform the songs all out had been awesome. He’s glad Mori had come up with the idea. It had been a perfect way to jump back into the spotlight full force.

After he’d finally finished all his appearances and interviews, Mori had surprised him by asking him to meet him at the office before the launch party. Chuuya had still been in a good mood as he walked into Mori's office, appreciating the grand ocean view out the window as always.

“Chuuya,” Mori had said, his voice about as warm as it ever got, “Congratulations are in order. The album is on track to be an tremendous success.”

“Thanks, Boss,” Chuuya had said, laughing a little. He’d taken a seat in one of the chairs across from his desk. “But what did you really want to meet about?”

Mori’s grin had turned sharper, clearly amused. “I had an idea. You’re not set to tour until a few weeks from now, but how would you feel about doing some free shows leading up to that?”

Chuuya had looked at him blankly for a moment. “You want me to do *free* shows?”

Mori had grinned ever wider. “It’s a good move from a PR standpoint, gets you back out there with the fans.” He had leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms. “It will also drive up album sales even more. Then the people who aren’t able to obtain a ticket to one of the free shows will be clamoring even more to buy one for the real tour.”

Chuuya had shaken his head, snorting a little. “Of course they would. How did you manage to book more shows on such short notice?”

“It appears after this last year a number of our partners who own venues are clamoring to get back into our good graces,” Mori had replied with a shrug, amusement still clear in his eyes. “So, are you interested? First one would be in L.A. tomorrow night.”

“Absolutely,” Chuuya had said, smirking at Mori. More time on stage isn’t something he’d ever turn down, especially in L.A. It had sounded like the perfect way to get back to performing, at home and feeling better than ever before.

“Excellent,” Mori had said with a nod. “I won’t keep you then. Enjoy the release party.”

Chuuya hadn’t moved to leave yet as he stood though. “I wanted to thank you, for everything these past years,” he’d said, looking Mori in the eyes. “I appreciate it.”

“You earned everything you were given,” Mori had said lightly. “It isn’t every day you meet an artist of your caliber, or an executive.”

“Boss, just accept my gratitude,” Chuuya had said, rolling his eyes.

Mori had smiled then, almost fully genuinely. “Very well. You’ve made your point.” He’d gestured towards the door with an air of mockery. “You should hurry along if you don’t want to be late for your own party.”

Chuuya had given him a lopsided salute and turned to go, chuckling a little to himself. Few people had the opportunity to see all the different sides of the boss, and Chuuya appreciates that he’s one of them.

The album release party had been insane even by his standards. The place had been packed, and Chuuya had barely had a moment to himself. It had felt like every person there had wanted to speak to him and give him their thoughts on the album.

It had been extremely flattering but also a little draining. He’d spent the last few years at these types of parties drinking with his friends. He’d barely gotten to exchange more than a couple sentences with them at this one. It had been a surprise when he’d escaped to the bar during a free second and literally bumped into Kajii.

“Well, if it isn’t the man of the hour,” Kajii had said with a smirk. He’d raised a hand to the bartender. “Can I get a red wine with those beers? Top shelf shit.”

Chuuya had raised his eyebrows at him. “I thought I was banned from drinking red wine in crowded places.”

“It’s your fucking party,” Kajii had said as he passed him his glass after the bartender brought their drinks. “Spill on whomever you please.”

“Are you volunteering?” Chuuya had asked, taking a sip of the wine. He’d been pleased with the taste, it was indeed top shelf shit.

Kajii had grabbed one of the beers and raised it towards him. “Cheers, Baby Red. Guess people really are into all that sappy shit you write.”

“Cheers,” Chuuya had said, rolling his eyes and clinking their drinks. He’d leaned against the bar, sighing lowly in contentment. Kajii had mirrored him, taking a drink of his beer.

It would have been a normal minute between friends if it were anyone other than Kajii, who didn’t do quiet moments. So Chuuya had given him an expectant look as Kajii picked at the label of his beer with fidgety hands.

“So, uh, *Tales of Baby Red and The Lemon Fucker*,” Kajii had said, voice more than slightly awkward and still looking away. “That’s about me, right?”

“Who the fuck else would it be about?” Chuuya had asked incredulously.

“I just wanted to be fucking sure,” Kajii had said roughly. His face had gotten very red. Then his voice had become softer, though he still refused to look at Chuuya. “You know, I remember being so pissed when I heard they were putting you in The Black Lizards. Never thought I’d get a brother out of it.”

Chuuya had almost choked on the sip of wine he’d just taken. Kajii had just laughed and thumped him on the back. Chuuya had been about to reply when someone had appeared in front of them, hands on their hips and glaring.

“What is taking you so long?” Higuchi had asked indignantly. She’d reached around Kajii to grab the other beer from the bar. She’d lifted it and taken a long swig. Then she’d given them both a strange look. “What’s with your two? Oh, is this about the song? Kajii’s been very weird about it all day.”

“I have fucking not,” Kajii had said, not that either of them bought it. Higuchi had given him a pitying pat on the arm that he’d tried to swat away.

“Album is sensational by the way,” Higuchi had said lightly, directing it at Chuuya, “Not that I expected anything less.”

“Thanks, Guch,” Chuuya had said with a smile. No matter how many times he’d heard it, it still hadn’t worn off, and it was even better coming from a musician he respects.

“So are we not talking about you writing that love song about bandages?” Kajii had asked, raising his eyebrows and half-smirking at him. “Because I mean, called it, but have-.”

“I’ve got to work the room,” Chuuya had said, cutting him off. “Catch you two later.” Then he’d quickly walked away with as much dignity as he could.

That had been his approach throughout the day, avoid any and all questions about Dazai. It hadn’t exactly been easy either, what with Chuuya publicly declaring he was in love with him in a song. Everyone had wanted to know what Dazai’s reaction had been.

Chuuya hadn’t known how to tell them that he apparently hadn’t even had one.

Maybe it had been foolish, to think that Dazai might feel the same way he does. It had been so long, and there had been so much animosity between them these past years. But then Chuuya would remember the way Dazai had looked at him when they’d sang *Corruption* at that fundraiser, and he’d been unable not to hope.

That hope is gone now though. Chuuya still doesn’t know how he feels about his strange encounter with Dazai earlier. Him showing up to demand whether he was okay hadn’t been something he’d expected. It had been carefully kind, in the way that Dazai showed kindness. Chuuya hadn’t experienced it in some time.

It does mean something to Chuuya that he’d cared enough to check on him. Dazai’s blatant concern had made him feel known once again. Dazai had been the only one to see how hard *Arahabaki* had been for him back when he was sixteen. It had made sense for him to think it could damage him still.



Chuuya's heart had almost stopped when he'd walked out and seen Dazai standing in his living room. He'd wondered for a second if his hopes had not been unfounded. But Dazai hadn't been there to discuss the song he'd wanted him to be.

Of all the ways he'd anticipated a possible rejection, a freakishly polite one had not been on the list.

All of the bizarreness aside, it really comes down to this, Dazai does not feel the same way. That's blatantly obvious at this point.

Chuuya hadn't expected it to hurt so much either. Underneath the high of the album, there is a quiet and lingering devastation. A voice, whispering, *he doesn't love you*.

It's hitting him harder now that he's alone in his apartment and there aren't any distractions. Chuuya has heard a million songs about unrequited love in his life. He's had one by Dorothy Park lurking in his head since his rejection. *The sun's gone dim, and the moon's turned black. For I loved him, and he didn't love back.*

Chuuya sighs and turns on his tea kettle, throwing his jacket and keys on the counter. He lets the water heat up as he goes to change. It's a strange dichotomy he's living in currently, on top of the world and heartbroken simultaneously.

He pours himself a cup of tea and grabs his phone to check all his unread texts and messages while he waits for it to cool. He'd been too busy too keep up with all of them. He flicks through them as he tries not to sink into melancholy.

Maybe this is actually a good thing, Dazai rejecting him. Maybe this is the final push he needs to actually get over him. Maybe Chuuya could never move on because he'd kept his feelings to himself, and now that he's let them out he'll be able to let them go. It had always felt impossible before, but maybe this is what he'd been missing. This isn't the outcome Chuuya had wanted, but maybe it would be good for him in another way.

He's brought out of his musings by a text from an unknown number. It's off-putting because despite how many phones Chuuya has broken in recent years, he is much more careful with his phone number. He does not give it out lightly. It had been one of the very first lessons he'd learned at PMR, the value of privacy when it came to certain things.

Chuuya's eyes narrow as he opens the message, noting the L.A. area code.

**[Unknown Number 8:23pm]: Hi, this is Atsushi Nakajima. We've never met, but I've always greatly admired you and your music. Your new album is truly incredible. Also, I think this is something you deserve to see.**

Chuuya's frown deepens as he reads. He'd let go of any grudge he'd held towards Atsushi Nakajima once everything had gotten sorted out with the ADA and The Guild last fall. His kindness towards Kyouka and especially Lucy had also endeared Chuuya towards him. Lucy is always very tight-lipped about it, but it's clear how Atsushi is one of the select few people she lets underneath her very hard outer shell.

Chuuya has no idea what the fuck he could be sending him though. He clicks on the attachment with a strange mix of trepidation and anticipation.

He almost drops his phone when he realizes what he's looking at. Suddenly Chuuya feels wide awake.

Dazai is humming as he pours himself a *large* coffee before he heads to work the day after Bygone Days had been released. He hadn't really slept the night before. Possibly because he'd spent the night replaying the video of a certain song. That had possibly led him down a rabbit hole into watching other videos of a certain duo until the sun was already up and there really wasn't any point to sleeping anymore.

He's jittery for reasons other than lack of sleep though. Dazai is usually one to plan things out in advance, but when the opportunity had presented itself yesterday he'd jumped on it immediately. He'd gone with speed rather than nuance, but that's only served to make him even more impatient. It's an odd combination with the flood of relief and giddiness that he's been feeling since he'd heard *I'm Not Allowed To Comment on Ongoing Port Mafia Records' Legal Disputes, But-*.

There have been times in Dazai's life where he's felt content but nothing to this degree. He kind of feels like singing from the rooftops. And also like vomiting. Requited love is more visceral than he'd imagined it to be.

*"You're a bitch, you're a bastard,"* sings Dazai lightly as he slips on his coat. *"You're the biggest asshole I've ever met."*

He's cut off from the next line by someone barging into his apartment. Dazai blinks in shock at the intruder. It takes him a second to recognize that it's Atsushi.

"Dazai," says Atsushi, sounding slightly out of breath. He looks it too, leaning over his knees a little where he stands.

"What's going on?" asks Dazai once he gets over his shock. His nerves start to overtake him, and he sticks his hands into his pockets to hide the slight trembling. He'd been impatient, but the threat of the result is bringing the need to throw up back again.

"I, uh, I think I might have messed up," says Atsushi, looking frazzled and biting his lip. Then his eyes widen as he takes in Dazai's apartment, the tiny area filled with a great number of books on various surfaces and his bell set that has piles of dishes on it. "Do you always keep your place like this?"

Dazai has to restrain himself from snapping his fingers at him to get him to focus. “What did you mess up?” he asks, barely keeping his voice neutral.

“Oh, right,” says Atsushi, frazzled again as he winces and pulls his phone out. “Yesterday after we were done talking, I did something I probably shouldn’t have.” He gives Dazai a sheepish look. “I was really upset, not that that’s an excuse.” He takes a deep breath. “I sent Chuuya Nakahara that song you wrote about him.”

“And what did he say?” asks Dazai, feeling like his blood is pounding in his veins. His voice comes out almost demanding.

“It was wrong of me, and I should have respected your-,” starts Atsushi before he stops and gives Dazai a confused look. “Wait, you’re not mad?” Atsushi’s eyes narrow. “Did you *plan* this?” He crosses his arms. “You could have just *asked*. Or done it yourself! Or-.”

“Atsushi,” says Dazai, allowing himself to display how anxious and high-strung he is, “What did he say?”

“He, um, didn’t really say anything,” says Atsushi, deflating a bit. “I didn’t even get his reply until I woke up this morning.” He walks over to Dazai and offers him his phone. “He sent back this strange document full of weird symbols.”

Dazai feels like his heart is in his throat as he takes the phone and brings it up to read. He’d be concerned if it were anyone other than Atsushi seeing him like this.

**[Chuuya Nakahara 4:07am]: Thanks kid. *Beast Beneath the Moonlight* was incredible. If you ever do anything to hurt Lucy, I’ll rip your face off.**

Dazai wants to smile and roll his eyes at the both of them for wasting time complementing each other’s music. His stomach is in knots as he opens the attachment Chuuya sent. His text having zero acknowledgement of his song has made him even more on edge.

Then once he realizes what it is, he’s laughing again, hunched over with the force of it.

Edits, Chuuya had sent him *edits*. He’d taken Dazai’s song and *edited* it. It’s far better than any words Chuuya could have sent.

But despite Kouyou’s attempts to make him alter it, Chuuya’s preferred style of songwriting is still undecipherable to everyone except himself. And Dazai, of course. No wonder Atsushi hadn’t known what to make of it, it’s practically unrecognizable as anything resembling music.

“Are you okay?” asks Atsushi, staring at him with wide eyes and more than a little concern.

“I’m fantastic,” says Dazai, trying to control his laughter. He quickly sends himself the edited version and hands Atsushi his phone back, still chuckling a bit.

“Are you sure?” asks Atsushi, clearly unconvinced. He takes his phone back and looks at the attachment again.

“Just peachy,” says Dazai, bringing out his own phone. He sees the text from Atsushi’s phone as well as something else, a news alert. It’s announcing the surprise concert of a certain artist, tonight in L.A. Dazai’s smile somehow grows even wider. Apparently the universe is tossing him a bone after all of its sabotaging antics.

Dazai shoves his phone back into his pocket and starts moving around his apartment in a slightly frenzied manner. He quickly calculates and plans as he gathers his things. “How did you get in here?” he asks Atsushi as he moves about.

“Oh, uh, Kunikida gave me a key in case of emergencies,” Atsushi replies, watching him with a baffled expression.

“Excellent,” says Dazai, shoving the last of what he’ll need into his coat pocket. Beyond not being black, trench coats also had the benefit of holding a lot of items. He starts towards the door and flashes Atsushi a grin. “Can you lock up behind you then? And tell everyone I won’t be in today?”

“Where are you going?” asks Atsushi, tone a mixture of worry and disapproval.

“Sorry, Atsushi,” says Dazai lightly, opening the door and glancing over his shoulder as he leaves. He smirks at his friend. “I have to go pick up my dog!”

“You don’t have a dog!” calls out Atsushi in confusion from behind him.

Dazai gets a sense of déjà vu as he sneaks around backstage at Chuuya’s show, feeling a bit like he’s fifteen again in Seoul, South Korea. Although he hadn’t been quite as recognizable back then. Now he has to draw up his hood and move quickly so that no one pays attention to him.

He really hasn’t even had time to be nervous up until this point. It’s all been a scramble to put this plan into motion. He’d had to make a recording of the song while incorporating Chuuya’s edits and then scheme into getting on stage at Chuuya’s concert. It had been a while since he’d had to be so duplicitous for personal gain, he’d enjoyed it more than he’d thought he would.

Dazai has been getting texts from Atsushi and later Kunikida throughout the day, but he’ll explain everything to them once it’s all done. This is something he has to do himself. He’s laying it all on the line this time.

The crowd is lively tonight, the screams and cheers have been thunderous. Chuuya is completely in his element, playing and singing with his extraordinary talent and charisma. Dazai has been disappointed he’s been too busy to really pay attention. But blackmailing the

man in the sound booth had taken precedent (he had given a brief thought about the morality of the action before quickly dismissing it, the ends more than justified the means.)

Chuuya has just finished *The Moon Awaits Her Executioner* when Dazai finally slips into place, shrugging out of his disguise sweatshirt and adjusting his stolen microphone in his ear. He's oddly less nervous than he'd been this morning, this time it's more anticipatory. He's never been so eager to be at someone's mercy before.

"Thanks, everyone," says Chuuya, smiling at the audience as he takes a drink from his water bottle, leaning against the piano. "You guys have been an amazing crowd tonight, seriously. I always love playing in L.A, but this has been phenomenal."

Chuuya always looks like he belongs on stage, and it's always been somewhat striking. Dazai is a little annoyed how affected he is. The pang in his stomach as Chuuya laughs and slips some hair that's fallen out of his ponytail is distracting, and he'd like to focus right now. This is possibly the most important performance of his life.

"L.A. is also home to the Pacific Ocean, the inspiration for this next song," says Chuuya, putting his water down and starting to head for the piano bench. Dazai gets a jolt of adrenaline as he realizes it's time. "I've always-."

"Mic check, one two, one two," says Dazai airily as he walks on stage, his voice cutting Chuuya off. The other boy freezes as he sees him, but the audience absolutely explodes. The screams are almost palpable.

"Hello, Los Angeles," says Dazai smoothly, focusing on the crowd rather than Chuuya, who are yelling and shouting in earnest. "Sorry to interrupt. My name is Osamu Dazai, for those of you who don't know me."

He can't resist looking over at Chuuya at that, who is rolling his eyes and shaking his head. There's a hint of a smile on his face though, and that tiny expression lights a spark within Dazai.

"I was hoping I could ask a favor," says Dazai, walking towards the piano and Chuuya, like a moth drawn to a flame.

"Were you now?" asks Chuuya, leaning back against the piano in an expectant way, an air of self-satisfaction in the gesture.

Dazai has to subtly clear his throat. "There's this new song I wrote. I was hoping to get your thoughts on it."

"Pretty sure I already gave you my thoughts," says Chuuya lightly, standing up straight to look Dazai right in the eyes. There's amusement in them, but also something deeper, something that Dazai wants to drown in.

"Yeah, but I know you work best when you hear something in person," answers Dazai breezily, having to rein in the force of his reaction. He turns to face the crowd again. "Would you guys mind?"

There is an immediate outburst of enthusiastic cheering. Dazai tilts his head at Chuuya to get his response, the hint of a smirk on his face.

“Fine,” says Chuuya, no hint of annoyance in his voice. He shrugs casually. “Let’s hear it.”

Dazai winks at the crowd, gesturing to the side of the stage for the man to start his recording. “Thanks for allowing me to hog your stage time,” he says to Chuuya, fighting to keep his voice light and upbeat. It’s difficult with the lyrics that are about to come out of his mouth. He shifts to speak in the direction of the audience, “Here’s *Swan Song*.”

The music starts. It’s soft, slow, soulful. It definitely wouldn’t belong on *Once More With Feeling*. In fact, it’s unlike anything that Dazai has written in years. It’s the earnest kind of melody he has always shied away from, one where the words mattered more than the notes.

Dazai starts singing, for once carrying more about the delivery than whether he sings the vocals flawlessly. He walks forward towards the audience as he begins.

*“I’ve never cared much for honesty or candor,”* he sings, not putting any effort into putting on a show but with sincerity. *“For veracity can be a scourge.”*

*But as I know that you are sick of lies*

*I will attempt to let my feelings and lyrics merge*

Dazai continues, angling towards Chuuya more, not quite singing to him, but not quite not.

*Wherever I go, I never seem to escape you*

*A bond from which I cannot abscond*

*And the song you wrote demands an answer*

*So consider this my formal response*

The music fades for a moment, and Dazai sings quietly, *“The first thing I think of, when I think of you is-.”* He turns to face Chuuya fully, singing louder and more emphatically.

*A karaoke bar in Yokohama*

*Before anyone knew our names*

*I dragged you there as a distraction*

*Little did I know that nothing would ever be the same*

*Because I had already recognized*

*That I would never tire of the sound of your voice*

*But the second I heard it intertwine with mine*

*There was never any longer any choice*

*I had already decided not to die*

*But it wasn't until I made music with you*

*That I truly started to live*

Dazai pauses before he continues, singing more softly but with no less emotion. Chuuya's eyes are focused completely on him, giving him the push he needs to keep going.

*And when I hear the word love*

*You are who I think of*

*Because it wasn't until I met you*

*That I understood what it meant*

The music gets ever slower, more somber. Chuuya is clearly making an effort to keep his expression blank, to allow Dazai to finish without interfering. But there's a trace of something warmer in his posture that he can't hide. Dazai continues on, the style more complex than he usually attempts, pushing his voice to hit the notes.

*But I never told you, never let it show*

*Because the weak fear happiness itself*

*Once something is gained it can be lost*

*And I couldn't face the word without your help*

*But the harder I tried to hold on*

*The more I pushed you away*

*And by the time I left*

*I didn't think you even cared whether I stayed*

*"And if there is a coward among us," sings Dazai solemnly, looking right into Chuuya's eyes now, "It has only ever been me. Terrified of what uneasiness lies in being loved."*

*"But I have come to recognize," continues Dazai, voice almost catching with the weight of the words, "That there are people in this world who are more than worth every risk of grief or sorrow." His voice softens. "None so much as you."*

Dazai can't help the slight smile that comes out with the words, and the answering lift of Chuuya's lips turns it into a full grin as he reaches the climax of the song, the music shifting to a faster and brighter tone. Dazai sways with it as he belts out the lyrics.

*And I know that you said that you'd rather never hear my voice again*

*Frankly, I'm sick of it too*

*The only music I'm interested in making after this*

*Is if I get to make it with you*

His voice rings out as the instruments start to fade. Then the bells come in with an upbeat jingle and Dazai adds smugly, *"And not that it's a competition, but I definitely loved you first."* Dazai winks at the audience as he finishes.

The audience roars as the music wanes, but Dazai is only semi-aware of it. This song is for one person, and that's the only person whose reaction Dazai cares about. Chuuya is still wearing a mostly blank expression though. Dazai has never felt this vulnerable and exposed in his life.

Chuuya walks forward and grabs him roughly by the wrist and starts dragging him offstage. He says to the still screaming crowd over his shoulder, "If you'll excuse us for a moment."



Chuuya stays quiet as he pulls him along, flicking off his mic. Dazai does the same, the need to vomit is returning again. He pushes it down as he and Chuuya arrive backstage. The area is thankfully devoid of anyone else.

Dazai swallows roughly as Chuuya faces him, preparing himself for whatever Chuuya has to say. He still hasn't let go of his wrist. The contact is making his heart pound ever harder.

Chuuya doesn't say anything though. He uses the hand that isn't holding onto Dazai's wrist to grab the back of Dazai's neck, yank him down, and crash their lips together.

It takes Dazai a split-second to react, for his own free hand to anchor in Chuuya's hair so he can kiss him back just as voraciously. Chuuya makes a pleased sound, and Dazai tries to pull him ever closer, almost yanking Chuuya's hair out of his ponytail with the force of it.

Dazai isn't sure if he's breathless from the kiss itself or the overwhelming amount of feelings he's experiencing. How many times had he thought about this, had told himself he could never have it? That hadn't stopped him from wanting it though. Things rarely live up to expectations, but this surpasses any Dazai ever had.

It's a little messy, both of them are sweating from performing, Chuuya more so than him. Errant pieces of Chuuya's hair keep getting in the way. The way their lips slide together is slightly desperate, Chuuya still has an iron grip on Dazai's wrist.

Then Chuuya huffs a quiet laugh and things shift, soften. Chuuya kisses him slower, deeper, his grip loosens. Dazai's heart flutters with the gentleness of it. He adjusts his hand in Chuuya's hair, still holding him close but no longer squeezing so tightly.

The tenderness might be Dazai's undoing. Chuuya stops holding his wrist and slips his fingers into his, the gesture so blatantly affectionate Dazai's breath stutters. He feels Chuuya's lips lift into a smile against his, and Dazai's chest tightens sharply.

He surprises himself by being the one to pull away first. He doesn't go far though, just separates them enough so he can say, "I hadn't listened to it yet." His voice is quiet and wrecked. "I heard *Arahabaki* on the radio and I raced over there." Dazai raises their linked hands so he can press his lips to the back of Chuuya's, speaking against it. "I hadn't even listened to it yet, I was too busy panicking about whether you were okay."

"I thought you were a bit too calm about it," says Chuuya, smile lifting into a smirk, his tone full of fondness, "Even if you didn't feel the same way."

"I do," says Dazai immediately, leaning forward to rest their foreheads together. "I really, really do."

They linger like that for a moment. Dazai runs his thumb lightly along Chuuya's hand where it's still clasped in his. Their breathing evens out, and Dazai's pulse starts to resemble that of a normal human's. The contentment doesn't fade at all though.

"I can't believe you had that Atsushi kid send me your song," says Chuuya eventually, pulling away and snickering a little. "And that last line definitely wasn't in the version he sent

me."

"There was the chance that you wouldn't look at it if it came from me, if you believed I had truly rejected you," says Dazai without shame, shrugging casually. "I didn't want to take that chance. I just wanted you to know. I was sick of waiting."

Chuuya's smirk turns into more of a real smile, but the smugness lingers. "Been a while since you've manipulated someone for me." He squeezes Dazai's hand lightly. "For the record, I would have still looked at it if it came from you."

"Noted," says Dazai, cheerfulness not a sham for once. He can't think of anything else to say though. He just smiles at Chuuya like an imbecile.

"Stop mooning," says Chuuya, rolling his eyes and letting go of Dazai's hand. His smirk is back in full force as he walks back towards the stage that Dazai had honestly half forgotten about. "I've got a concert to finish."

"Chuuya." Dazai speaks before he thinks. Looking at Chuuya isn't helping him think either. Dazai doesn't have the words for everything he's feeling in this moment.

"Watch your high notes," he ends up saying. His voice somehow comes out normal sounding. "You were a bit pitchy at the end of *The Moon Awaits Her Executioner*."

"I fucking love you," says Chuuya without hesitation. Which is truly unfair because Dazai doesn't have anything to counter that with. He can only stare at Chuuya in shock while Chuuya laughs and walks back on stage.

"Sorry for the interruption," says Chuuya to the crowd, slipping back into his stage persona with ease. He sounds a mixture of exasperated and fond that makes Dazai feel a bit like he's seventeen again. "You know how boyfriends can be."

Dazai had thought the crowd was loud when they played *Corruption* together after over five years. He'd thought they'd been even louder when he'd showed up tonight. But the screams after Chuuya's announcement put that amount of noise to shame. Chuuya winces a little at the roar, but he never stops smiling.

Dazai doesn't either. Happiness is a feeling he isn't all that familiar with, not like this. It drowns everything else out. Dazai should probably be checking his phone and dealing with all of the people and things he still has to handle. Instead, he just settles in to watch the rest of the concert of his favorite singer.

It's interesting getting the chance to properly snoop about Chuuya's apartment. Dazai had been so tense and anxious the last time he'd been here he really hadn't looked around that much. Many things are different, none of the furniture is the same except for the grand piano in the living room. The hat sitting atop it makes Dazai pause for a moment, then he's distracted by going through all the books on Chuuya's bookshelf. Unfortunately most of them are about music rather than anything interesting.

It's not all unfamiliar though. The disorganization of the place hasn't changed, there's a smattering of CDs, clothes, and mugs everywhere. Then there's Chuuya's fancy tea kettle and the same ugly blanket on his updated couch. The things Dazai does recognize make him smile (and he doesn't even have to hold back now that he's alone.)

After the concert had ended and Chuuya had finished soaking up all the applause (which had gone on a bit too long for Dazai's patience), he'd come straight up to Dazai and told him that he had shit to do and to wait for him at his apartment.

"You already know the code to get in," Chuuya had said, both mocking and smug. Dazai had rolled his eyes and agreed then Chuuya had taken off without another word. Dazai had been a little caught off guard, but then exited quickly before he ended up stuck talking to any of the PMR employees or press lurking about the place.

Chuuya is taking his sweet time though. Dazai has finished inspecting the living room and is now going through his kitchen. The dishes are a mix of high end and plastic, and there's very little actual food. Chuuya had always accused Dazai of only eating junk when they were teenagers, it appears their roles have reversed. There is however an entire cupboard devoted completely to tea.

He's about to start putting the teabags in the wrong boxes when Chuuya walks in, eyes immediately going to him in the kitchen. He rolls his eyes as he approaches Dazai.

"Stop messing with my shit," he says, but there's no bite to his tone. His hair is wet, and he'd changed out of his concert clothes into jeans and a t-shirt that Dazai is sure cost more than a month of what he makes at the ADA.

"You were taking too long," says Dazai, though he puts down the tea to lean against the counter.

Chuuya lets out a half-snort. "I got out of there so fast I'm going to have to do damage control tomorrow." He walks up to Dazai and cups his jaw with his hands, kissing him lightly.

Dazai tries to follow when Chuuya pulls away, and Chuuya laughs at him. He takes one of Dazai's hands and tugs him out of the kitchen. "C'mon," he says, still laughing a little. It's not mocking though, it's a little dazed if anything.

Dazai allows Chuuya to pull him along without protest, his mind a jumbled mess of things. His throat feels a little dry as they reach the bedroom.

Out of the entire apartment, this is the room that is the most changed, mostly because Chuuya's old bedroom was a tiny little room that fit a twin bed and not much else. Now the bed is almost comically large, and the view of L.A. out the windows is stunning. The moonlight streaming through brightens the room so that everything is visible even without turning the lights on.

Chuuya leans in to kiss him again, but Dazai stops him with a hand to his chest. Chuuya's face freezes and he lets go of Dazai's hand, and Dazai immediately shifts his hand on his chest to grab his shoulder before he can pull away.

"There are things we should probably talk about," says Dazai, tone clearly disappointed. But being in Chuuya's bedroom had the unpleasant sensation of reminding him of the last time he'd slept in the same room as Chuuya, the night before he'd left for Japan and everything had fractured so rapidly.

"Probably," agrees Chuuya, visibly relaxing. His smile turns sharper. "Or we could save the talking for the morning." He steps closer and lowers his voice, "I heard everything I needed to in that song."

That is remarkably hard to argue with. Dazai's gut clenches and he lets go of Chuuya's shoulder to wrap his arms around his waist, pulling him in and kissing him. It's different than their frantic kissing backstage or gentler ones since. There's a different severity, an intent behind the way they press together, separate, and return.

Dazai's desire has never been quite so sharp. There are people he's been with whose company and bodies he's thoroughly enjoyed, but not like this. Everything feels heavier, but instead of dragging Dazai down it's entrancing him. It's too much and not enough simultaneously. He's overwhelmed and desperate for more.

Chuuya seems to feel the same. His touches are both rough and affectionate, pushing Dazai towards the bed as he runs a hand through his hair almost shyly. Dazai lets out a small sound at the gesture, and Chuuya's eyes darken as he pulls away to whip off his shirt, tossing it behind him carelessly.

"That's new," says Dazai, eyes caught on the small lizard on Chuuya's hip, running a thumb over the tattoo lightly. He catches the small shiver Chuuya does at the motion.

"It's not the only one," says Chuuya, voice coming out somewhat strange. It makes more sense as he turns around and Dazai sees the symbols on the back of his left shoulder, the ink darker and clearly more recent.

"When did you get this done?" asks Dazai, own voice coming out quiet and cautious. His hand is careful as it traces the characters for Arahaki, his eyes stinging a little.

"November," answers Chuuya, and he sounds more proud than dismayed this time. His posture shifts to something steadier.

Dazai presses his lips to the skin, mumbling against it, "I like it."

Chuuya twists around, smile both breathtaking and arrogant. He doesn't say anything else, just shoves Dazai at the bed again. Dazai almost trips as he hits it, landing on it clumsily. Chuuya follows him, standing in between his knees and having to lean down to kiss him now.

It's distracting as Dazai works to get his own shirt off. Chuuya is no help, content to kiss Dazai's lips and then around his jaw. There's a playful edge to his movements, and Dazai is caught between lingering in it and ripping off his clothes in impatience.

He is eventually successful though, and he throws his shirt towards the direction of the floor. Dazai pauses when that leaves him in just his bandages. Chuuya doesn't hesitate though, running his hands against the material as if it were his skin. His touch is warm and appreciative, and a little mischievous as his hands wander lower.

Dazai catches his wrists, grip almost painfully tight. "I have to tell you something," he says, almost as if the words were forced from his mouth. His voice is awkwardly loud in the quiet room.

Chuuya is completely still, watching him with a serious expression. "Are you sure?" he asks, only concern in his voice, not even the slightest hint of pressure.

His horrific kindness almost makes Dazai choke. He kisses him quickly, the force almost bruising. "I have never been more sure about anything in my life," he breathes out as he pulls away. He releases Chuuya's wrists and slowly starts to unravel the bandages covering his right arm.

If Chuuya were still before, now he's like a statue. Dazai's hands are trembling a little as he works and his scars become visible. He hears Chuuya inhale a little more sharply at the sight. Dazai keeps working though, taking them all off until his upper body is completely bare.

Even though it's Chuuya, Dazai has to resist the urge to cover his arms. The sight of his scars still makes him want to retch, and having someone else see them makes the sensation even worse. He's never felt so disgustingly vulnerable.

Chuuya's eyes are focused on his face though when he looks up. Dazai swallows harshly as he meets his eyes. It reminds him that he could grab his bandages right now, wrap himself back up and Chuuya wouldn't raise a single protest.

*If you have something to tell me, you'll tell me*, Chuuya had told him more than once, and he'd always meant it. He'd never expected Dazai to tell him things, not even when he'd revealed his darkest thoughts and memories. Not even the night when Chuuya had seen his scars for the first time.

But Dazai doesn't want to tell Chuuya as part of some exchange where they have give up equal parts of themselves. He wants Chuuya to know because he simply has no desire to have any kind of barriers between them anymore, even the kind he'd put up for his own protection.

"I tried to kill myself," says Dazai, voice devoid of emotion, "When I was ten. I didn't succeed."

Chuuya struggles but manages to keep his face neutral, and his eyes never leave Dazai's. He doesn't speak though. He's giving Dazai the option to say more if he wants to.

"I don't want to die anymore," says Dazai, voice barely above a whisper. He has to look away from Chuuya, shifting to look down at his arms instead. "I just don't want anyone to see them."

"I don't have to see them," says Chuuya, voice equally quiet. "If you don't want me to."

"No, I didn't mean you," says Dazai, tone almost annoyed. He looks up at Chuuya again. "I trust you."

It's something he's known for years, but he's not sure he's ever said it so openly before. Chuuya's eyes widen a little at the admission. He reaches out with his left hand so slowly, giving Dazai more than enough opportunity to pull away. He doesn't though, he lets Chuuya run his fingers along his scars so lightly he barely feels it.

"I'm glad," says Chuuya, words thick with emotion, "That you didn't succeed." His fingers move down Dazai's arm with the same careful pressure and pace. "I'm glad that you're here."

Dazai's own words come out unsteadily, "Me too." He takes a deep breath and grabs Chuuya's hand on his inner arm. Chuuya starts to pull his hand away, but Dazai doesn't let him. He takes his hand and pushes it to his skin with more force. "But stop pawing at me like I'm made of glass."

Chuuya looks confused for a second, then he laughs a little. He yanks his hand out of Dazai's grasp, but his touch is no longer hesitant when he puts both his hands on Dazai's bare shoulders. Dazai has to hide his reaction, his skin is sensitive due to him usually keeping it covered, even during these sorts of things.

"I would have told you if you had asked," says Dazai, tone still a little stiff but much lighter than before. He puts his own hands on Chuuya's hips.

"I never would have asked," says Chuuya, voice mildly angry, as if he's offended at the notion. He steps closer, circling his arms around Dazai's neck.

"I know," says Dazai, words coming out slightly smugly. He shifts his hands on Chuuya's hips so he can tug him forward. Chuuya huffs but pulls his legs up on the bed so that he's straddling Dazai. He runs his hands through Dazai's hair again, almost lazily this time.

Dazai takes the opportunity to let his hands explore Chuuya thoroughly. He'd seen him shirtless many times before, but he'd always tried to act as if it had no effect on him. Now he doesn't have to hide his appreciation as he runs his hands over Chuuya's muscles, which are now even more impressive than they'd used to be.

Chuuya's hands tighten in his hair, and he's giving Dazai a look that's a mix between irritated and aroused when he looks up. It makes Dazai laugh, but he doesn't laugh long as Chuuya kisses him again, more insistently than before. It's warmer now that their bare skin is touching, and Dazai quickly gets swept up in it, his own touches turning more deliberate.

They quickly lose the rest of their clothes, and it's heady, and turbulent, and *fun*. Chuuya nips at his ear when his pants get stuck on his right leg and Dazai almost kicks him off him in surprise and Chuuya practically cackles. But underneath all the thrill and chaos, there's an undercurrent of tenderness. Every time Chuuya smiles softly or strokes his skin lightly, almost a caress, Dazai feels the force of it. He's sure Chuuya is aware of his own as well, not that he's making any effort to hide it.

Chuuya is still in his lap as he raises his hands to take off his choker, but Dazai's hands catch his before he does.

"Or you could leave it on," says Dazai, voice low and a little out of breath.

Chuuya narrows his eyes, waiting for an explanation.

"I always pictured you wearing it when I imagined this," says Dazai easily, grinning fully.

Chuuya lowers his hands. "Anything for you, baby," he says, smirking and blatantly mocking him.

Dazai takes his revenge by shoving him onto the bed, rolling on top of him, and kissing him fiercely, digging his hands into Chuuya's hair and winding their bodies together. It backfires spectacularly when he pulls away to catch his breath and he sees Chuuya laid out beneath him, hair an absolute mess and looking up at Dazai with swollen lips and dark eyes.

"You're perfect," says Dazai without deciding to, voice catching on the words a little.

Chuuya scoffs, pushing his hair out of his face. "You, more than any other person on the planet, know how untrue that is."

Dazai shakes his head. "You're perfect," he repeats, tone holding no room for argument.

"Stop fucking talking," says Chuuya, voice slightly strangled as he pulls Dazai down so their hips line up perfectly, and Dazai has never been so happy to shut up in his entire life.

Dazai had thought it would be different, sleeping in the same bed as Chuuya after this many years had passed. It isn't exactly the same, their bodies have both shifted with age and Chuuya's new bed is actually much comfier. They don't have to squish together to fit. But overall, it's still warm and familiar. Their legs are tangled, and Dazai is pressed against Chuuya's shoulder, his left hand stroking Chuuya's side softly, contently.

"I am fucking exhausted, mackerel," says Chuuya a little gruffly, using his right hand to stop Dazai's in place.

“Is that a complement?” asks Dazai, lifting his head to smirk at Chuuya.

Chuuya scowls and kicks at him, and Dazai thinks he could possibly burst with happiness. He decides to behave though, rearranging himself around Chuuya so they can sleep comfortably.

“I love you,” whispers Dazai into his neck, because he’s said it in a song but he’s never had the thrill of saying it just himself yet. He smiles against his skin.

“I love you too,” says Chuuya effortlessly. Then his tone turns surly. “And we’ll still be in love in the morning, so go the fuck to sleep.”

Chuuya wakes up with the feeling of bandages against his skin. He’s smiling before he even opens his eyes. Dazai’s hair is slightly damp where he’s leaning against him. He’d obviously gotten out of bed to shower and wrap himself up then come back to lay with Chuuya. It’s a tiny gesture, but it makes Chuuya’s heart lurch.

He’s wanted this for so long, to wake up with Dazai and just be together. It feels almost surreal to actually have it. But he still can recall every lyric to Dazai’s song, and every touch they’d shared since. It’s very, very real.

“Morning,” says Chuuya, voice still a little thick with sleep and the toll of singing a full show last night. He should probably take it easy today. But he’d gone years without talking to Dazai, and he’s not going to give up the chance now over a little sore throat (though he can hear Kouyou accuse him of abusing his instrument in his head.)

“Morning,” says Dazai, a hint of brightness in his voice, letting go of him so they can both sit up.

Chuuya rubs his eyes and forces himself to get out of bed, stretching his arms behind his head. He grabs a sweatshirt from his floor and pulls it on, looking up to see Dazai watching him, clearly appreciative of the view. Chuuya is embarrassed to feel his face flush.

“My flight for New York leaves at eleven,” says Chuuya, unsure why those are the words that decide to come out. Dazai frowns a little, scooting towards the edge of the bed and hanging his legs over it.

“It’s a little before nine now,” says Dazai, and the earlier brightness from his voice is gone. He smiles at Chuuya though. “Go shower, I’ll make us breakfast.”

Chuuya is sure he misheard him. “You know how to cook?”



Dazai laughs, standing up and kissing Chuuya on the forehead quickly before walking out of the room. “Better hurry or it’ll be cold!” he calls out behind him.

Chuuya shakes his head but quickly showers and changes into clean clothes, shoving his hair into a bun. He still can’t quite believe his eyes when he walks out into the kitchen to see Dazai scooping eggs out of a pan onto two plates. Chuuya didn’t even remember buying eggs. He hadn’t been eating at home much with all the frenzy of the album.

His surprise is replaced by amusement when he sees a large mug of tea next to one of the plates. Chuuya takes a seat and grabs it, raising it towards Dazai as a thanks. They share pathetically large grins before eating at Chuuya’s counter. The food is shockingly decent, simple but good.

It’s quiet as they finish up. The air feels heavier. There’s a lot to be discussed, but Chuuya doesn’t know where to start. Last night he’d been too caught up in the intense relief and desire to think about what came next.

“I’ve got a question,” says Dazai, stopping picking around at his plate and turning to face Chuuya on his stool.

Chuuya rolls his eyes. “Then ask it.” He turns to face Dazai as well.

“Are you interested in making music as a duo again?” asks Dazai, voice completely neutral, as if the answer doesn’t matter to him in the slightest. His face is carefully blank as he looks at Chuuya.

“Did you think that I wouldn’t be?” asks Chuuya, raising an eyebrow. He laughs. “Of course I am.” He reaches down and grabs one of Dazai’s hand, smirking a little. “Solo artists are overrated anyway.”

Dazai’s answering smile makes Chuuya’s breath catch. Chuuya is still getting used to it, an unguarded Dazai. He’d already been gone on small glimpses of him, now being exposed full force is slightly daunting in the best way possible.

Chuuya’s smile dims as his voice becomes more serious. “I’m not leaving Port Mafia Records.”

“I never said you had to,” says Dazai, own smile retreating. He clenches onto Chuuya’s hand a little tighter.

“Look, I get why you left,” says Chuuya, tone softening. “What happened to your friend was fucked up. I’m not going to make any excuses for that. There is no excuse for that. But it’s different for me.” He sighs. “They’re my family, including Mori.” He forces himself to add the last part, knowing the damage it will do.

Dazai immediately releases his hand, his expression darkening. “You consider Ogai Mori your *family*?” The disgust is clear in his voice.

“I know you’ve always hated him,” says Chuuya carefully. “I don’t blame you for that. The way he treated you justified it.” He pauses, unsure how to explain his relationship with the boss, how it had shifted over the years into mutual respect, and then something even a little deeper.

“A couple years ago, my mom’s parents tracked me down,” says Chuuya. Dazai looks confused and wary at the change in subject but doesn’t interrupt. “They threatened to go public about how my mom died if I refused to meet with them.” His voice is sharp, still angry at their underhanded tactics. “Mori took care of it, and I never heard from them again.”

Dazai eases up a little but not completely. “There isn’t a person he wouldn’t destroy if it benefitted him,” says Dazai, no longer disgusted but stating a fact.

“It wouldn’t benefit him to destroy me,” says Chuuya, having to fight to keep his tone calm. “He knows I would never do anything to harm PMR.” Chuuya looks down and says quietly, “He wants me to take over once he steps down.” He’d never told anyone else that, not even Kouyou.

He looks up when he feels Dazai’s hand grab his, intertwining their fingers. “I don’t trust him,” says Dazai plainly. “But I trust you. If you say he won’t make a move against you, I believe you.”

Chuuya lets out a long breath, ridiculously relieved. He squeezes Dazai’s fingers lightly. It’s another sign how things have changed over the years, he and Dazai had *never* been able to come to terms on Mori when they were younger.

“Thank you,” says Chuuya, trying to put how much he means it into the words. He would give up almost anything to sing with Dazai again, but PMR isn’t one of those things. The concept of being able to have both is a little dizzying.

Dazai is frowning though, looking at their hands with a solemn expression. “I should have gone with you to Japan,” he says suddenly.

“What?” asks Chuuya, completely thrown off. He isn’t sure what he’d been expecting Dazai to say, but it certainly hadn’t been that.

“I should have gone with you to Japan,” repeats Dazai, voice resolute. “After Arther died.”

Chuuya sighs, his stomach clenching a little as it always does when he thinks about that time in his life. He still misses Arthur a great deal. He wishes he could have gotten to hear Bygone Days. But he had told him not to live in the past, and Chuuya tries to live by that advice.

“And I shouldn’t have ignored you after I left,” says Chuuya bluntly. He won’t allow Dazai to bear this burden alone. “Even if you had come, I probably would have pushed you away. I was...I wanted to be hurt and angry and alone.”

“The only reason I stayed was because of you,” says Dazai quietly, not looking any less grave. “Mori implied that he wouldn’t let Double Black record together again until PMR had its next breakout artist.”

“Akutagawa,” says Chuuya as he catches on, his eyes widening. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

Dazai doesn’t answer for a moment, and Chuuya is starting to get pissed when he finally speaks up, his voice bleak. “You said that I didn’t care when Mori split us up. I wanted to prove you wrong.”

“You don’t owe me any apologies,” says Chuuya, once he thinks he can speak, though his voice is still a little unsteady. “We’re both to blame for things going to shit. I don’t care about any of that.” He leans in closer so he can look Dazai directly in the eyes. “I care about us being together now.”

“Okay,” agrees Dazai, own voice a little shaky. “I just don’t want it to happen again, to lose you over misunderstandings and foolishness.”

“It won’t,” says Chuuya adamantly. “I won’t let it.” He smiles lightly. “Let’s make a deal.”

“What kind of deal?” asks Dazai, starting to sound a bit more normal.

“To be honest,” says Chuuya simply. “Even when it hurts.” He holds up his free hand. “I don’t expect you to tell me everything, or the things you don’t want to share. But the essential things.”

“I can do that,” says Dazai, voice sincere. “You’ve got a deal, slug.”

Chuuya grins like an idiot at the dumb nickname. It brings him back to what they’d been talking about earlier before they’d gotten sidetracked. “I don’t want you to come back to PMR.”

“You don’t?” Dazai looks surprised.

“No,” says Chuuya easily, shaking his head. “I’ve seen how you are with those buffoons at the ADA. They’re your friends. They make you happy.” He frowns a little. “I’ll never be happy about the way you left, but I’m glad that it made you what you are now.”

“You make me happy,” says Dazai loftily, leaning in and giving him a featherlight peck on the cheek. He’s smirking at he pulls back. “So if I’m not going back to PMR and you’re not leaving what are we going to do?”

“Like you don’t already have ideas,” says Chuuya, rolling his eyes and smirking back.

“I forget what it’s like, being known,” says Dazai, his voice borderline giddy.

“Get used to it, mackerel,” says Chuuya, pulling his hand out of Dazai’s and standing up from his stool. He picks up his now slightly cold tea and finishes off the rest of it.

“Dogs shouldn’t give their owners orders,” says Dazai obnoxiously, getting off his own stool and stacking their dishes together.

Chuuya groans, covering his eyes with a hand. “Why am I signing up for more of this?”

Dazai grabs the hand and pulls it away, snickering a little. "Because I get what your music is about."

"Do not use my lyrics against me," says Chuuya, his rough tone in stark contrast to the way he's smiling.

Dazai ends up riding with him to catch his flight. Chuuya even takes his own car instead of one of PMR's vans. He's lucky they're taking the PMR jet to New York, otherwise he'd be running terribly late. Not that he really cares, but Chuuya doesn't really want to spend the entire plane ride getting lectured.

Chuuya shakes his head as Dazai fiddles with the radio, searching for a song that he doesn't hate. "Stop that," he commands him, shoving his hand away. He keeps it on a station playing Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*.

"Sap," accuses Dazai. Chuuya flicks him off with one hand while he steers with the other.

"So, when did you know you were in love with me?" asks Dazai, tone full of smugness and mischief.

"Look, a mackerel fishing for complements," says Chuuya, giving him an unimpressed look.

"You're my boyfriend now," says Dazai, sticking his feet up on the dashboard. Chuuya scowls at the dirt he leaves. "Shouldn't you be giving me complements freely?"

"You'll get what you deserve," says Chuuya, attempting to hide his grin. "Dallas."

"Dallas?" repeats Dazai, clearly interested and probing for more information.

"Yeah," says Chuuya easily. "You made us sing *Life's Better With a Little Party In It*." He snorts a little. "I looked over at you, dancing just terribly. I'd rarely seen you that carefree." Chuuya shrugs. "And I just thought, I could do this shit for the rest of my life."

"It is incredibly unfair of you to tell me something like that when we're in a moving vehicle," says Dazai, pout clear in his voice. His expression is bright though when Chuuya glances over at him.

"You asked," Chuuya points out. "How about you?"

"Phoenix," says Dazai casually.

Chuuya frowns, trying to remember anything special about the city or the show, but he comes up with nothing. “What happened in Phoenix?”

“You got me a water,” says Dazai, as if that’s an explanation.

“I got you a water?” repeats Chuuya, sure that he misheard him somehow.

Dazai breaths out through his nose shortly. “I pretty much already knew, it was more that was when I accepted it.”

“I’m not sure if I didn’t know you felt something, or if I didn’t let myself know,” says Chuuya, biting his lip.

“I didn’t want you to know,” says Dazai plainly. “I didn’t want Mori to take us and manipulate everything for his own gain.”

“Oh, he totally would have,” agrees Chuuya, laughing a little as he pictures it. “I wouldn’t have minded though.”

“It also gave me an excuse to not ruin it,” adds Dazai, voice a little more somber.

“God, sometimes we are too fucking alike,” says Chuuya, shaking his head. “I felt the same way.” He swallows a little roughly. “That, and, well, being in love seemed like a very human thing to do.”

“I haven’t even told you yet how I felt when I heard *Arahabaki*,” says Dazai, voice a little strained. “I don’t know if I have the words. But it’s the best song you’ve ever written, and I-.” Dazai cuts himself off to clear his throat. “I’ve always known you were human. I’m glad you know now too.”

Chuuya reaches over to grab Dazai’s hand and link their fingers together. “I’m glad too,” he says simply. It’s still perhaps a half-truth, but it’s more true than it’s ever been before.

“I knew you felt something towards me,” says Dazai, stroking his thumb along the back of Chuuya’s palm. His voice has returned to normal.

“Did you?” asks Chuuya dryly.

“I tried to deny it for a long time,” admits Dazai. “But then when you passionately serenaded me on my seventeenth birthday it got too hard to keep pretending.”

Chuuya snorts. “I have never been able to lie during a song.”

“I almost kissed you right then and there on stage in front of everyone,” reveals Dazai without shame. Chuuya laughs even harder.

“Now that would have been something,” he says almost wistfully.

They’re quiet for a moment, and Dazai looks contemplative when Chuuya looks over at him.

“Hey,” says Chuuya seriously, “I don’t mind that it took this long. All the shitty parts were worth it for this.” He brings Dazai’s hand up to press his lips to the back of it.

“Sap,” accuses Dazai again, but his expression is openly fond. It makes Chuuya’s heart stutter, and he has to remind himself to focus on the road. It feels like they reach their destination way too quickly.

Chuuya wonders what to say but Dazai surprises him by getting out of the car when he parks. Chuuya follows him, grabbing his suitcase from the backseat. They’ve barely talked about what’s going to happen now that Chuuya’s leaving for tour. They’ve been too busy dealing with all their other shit.

Now Chuuya is dreading another separation. It feels ominously similar to when he’d left for tour with The Black Lizards. But Chuuya reminds himself how much things have changed since then, of their new deal. That doesn’t make the prospect of saying goodbye any easier.

Dazai is leaning against the passenger door when Chuuya walks over. His expression is hard to interpret. There’s a group of PMR employees nearby loading the plane, but Chuuya ignores them for the moment.

“I don’t suppose you could come with?” asks Chuuya, trying to hide the melancholy in his tone but doing a horrible job.

“No, unfortunately I can’t,” says Dazai, frowning himself. “I’ve got a meeting with Mori.”

Chuuya gives Dazai a long look. “You don’t have to do that alone. I could go with you.”

“This is something I have to do myself,” says Dazai simply, shaking his head.

Chuuya accepts that, though he doesn’t really like it. “Fine. Call me when you’re done.”

Dazai sighs dramatically. “I don’t have time to call Chuuya. After I see Mori I have to go to the ADA and tell them I’m going to be following my boyfriend on tour.”

It probably isn’t good for Chuuya’s jaw to be smiling this often and this widely. “Are you now?”

“Please,” says Dazai arrogantly, smirking at him. “You hate touring without me.”

Chuuya pulls him in and kisses him soundly, not caring who sees. “Asshole,” he says as he pulls back, giving him one last quick peck before he grabs his luggage and walking towards the plane.

“Kay, bye,” calls out Dazai cheerfully, waving a hand enthusiastically. His voice carries loudly so that everyone around them can hear. “I love you!”

“Fuck. Off,” shouts Chuuya back. “I love you too.”

Dazai is disturbed by how natural it feels to walk into the PMR offices. He wishes he could say something dramatic like *the halls felt too wide and he was overcome by how much he had changed*. Instead he just swipes his still activated keycard to use the executive entrance with little fanfare. The elevator ride up to the top floor is even borderline pleasant.

The revulsion he'd been looking for hits when he arrives to the doors of Mori's office. Dazai contemplates knocking for a second before walking right in. He swings the door widely, but it's too heavy to crash into the opposite wall unfortunately.

Mori looks up as he enters, no sign of surprise on his face at Dazai's appearance. He smiles thinly, the gesture uncomfortably familiar. "Osamu," he says brightly.

"Ogai," returns Dazai cheerily, moving forward to take a seat in one of the opulent (and admittedly comfortable) chairs in front of Mori's desk.

Mori doesn't look annoyed at the use of his name, if anything he looks even more amused. He folds his hands in front of him and leans his elbows on the desk. "What can I do for you?" asks Mori pleasantly, as if they're friends who often do each other favors.

"I'm here to offer you a deal," says Dazai, voice light and airy. The sight of Mori is never a welcome one, but Dazai can't deny he feels a slight thrill going up against him like this. Mori is slime, but undeniably a worthy opponent.

"Are you now?" asks Mori, tilting his head in curiosity. "What sort of deal?"

"Chuuya and I are going to be releasing music again as a duo," announces Dazai simply. "I propose a joint venture between PMR and the ADA, splitting the profit sixty forty."

"Shouldn't Fukuzawa be the one to strike this sort of deal?" asks Mori innocently. But his interest is apparent from the flicker of emotion in his eyes.

"Of course," says Dazai easily, smiling widely. "You'll be the one to offer it to him formally. I'm just acting as an intermediary of sorts."

"If only I could accept your proposal," says Mori, frowning as if he's truly distraught. "Unfortunately, there's still the business of all that messy paperwork you left after your abrupt departure."

Dazai isn't sure whether he wants to laugh or roll his eyes. "So let's settle it now. I'm sure we can come to some sort of agreement."

"In that case," says Mori, reaching into a drawer and pulling out a large stack of papers, placing them on the desk with ceremony, "Let's get started."

Dazai isn't sure if Mori had drawn up the paperwork this morning or just always kept it in his desk on the off-chance Dazai would show up. Either option is both amusing and horrendous.

After almost five years after leaving PMR, it takes Dazai and Mori less than ten minutes to sort everything out. Mostly because Dazai waives his right to any of the money he's owed from the start. The thought of taking money from Port Mafia Records after what they'd done to Odasaku is repugnant. The majority of the contract involves Dazai agreeing to keep certain information to himself and retroactively agreeing to PMR using his voice on The Corrupted Files.

Dazai is surprised to feel a weight off his shoulders as he signs his name on the last page. He's not going to be finished with PMR like he'd envisioned, but this new start is much more appealing. It'll be good for the ADA too. As Mori would say, it's an optimal solution.

"Well, now that that's taken care of," says Mori casually, as if he hadn't been trying to force Dazai to finish it since the second he'd left, "I can give you the offer to give to Yukichi." Mori then brings out a second stack of already prepared paperwork.

This time Dazai doesn't bother to hold back his laughter. There is no one he detests more in the world, but he couldn't deny that when it came to business, there is no one he holds in higher regard. Mori had taken so much from him personally, but he'd also given Dazai almost all of the tools Dazai uses to get the things he wants. Their history is a convoluted mess of parasitism and mutualism.

Although Dazai still wants to tie Mori's shoes together and push him down the stairs. He doesn't think that urge is ever going to go away.

"There is a condition though," says Dazai once he stops laughing.

Mori looks expectant rather than surprised. "Oh?" he says lightly. "What would that be?"

"You don't get to touch our relationship," says Dazai, dropping his cheerful facade for a grave tone. He stares Mori down, letting him know how serious he is.

"Very well," agrees Mori, nodding slightly. "Though there is the matter of what is to be done if you and Chuuya split up." Mori smiles brightly as he says the words.

Dazai fixes Mori with the most unimpressed look he can muster. "That's not something you need to worry about," he says flatly. Then he smiles fully. "And if we did, I'm sure you would come up with something."

"Perhaps," says Mori nonchalantly as he signs the offer and passes it to Dazai, his own smile wide. "I look forward to working together again."

"Likewise," lies Dazai easily. He doesn't move towards the door quite yet though. "I do have one more condition."



It's a little difficult for Dazai to open the door of the ADA while he balances the box in his other hand. He eventually gets it though, flinging the door open so it hits the opposite wall with a bang. It's so much more satisfying than entering Mori's office had been.

"I got doughnuts," announces Dazai brightly as he walks in the door. The whole room turns to look at him with various expressions. Ranpo is the only one who looks delighted at his appearance.

"Do you know how many times I have called you in the last twenty-four hours?" asks Kunikida, stalking forward and fixing Dazai with a glare.

"You should be more careful, Kunikida," advises Dazai, slipping around him to walk towards the war table and set down the box of doughnuts. Ranpo immediately jumps up to inspect the haul. "Too much cell phone use can be bad for you, all that radiation."

"I like your new song," says Yosano, her eyes twinkling in amusement. "Well done."

"Thank you, Yosano," says Dazai, flashing her a smile, fairly certain she isn't congratulating him on the song. "Is the president in? I have something to give him."

"I can take it to him," offers Yosano knowingly, voice tinkling a bit with laughter.

"You're a saint," says Dazai cheerfully, practically shoving the documents into her gloved hands. He's not one to look a gift horse in the mouth, especially not when he's in a rush.

"What do you have to give to the president?" asks Kunikida, displeasure clear in his voice and his posture. "Dazai, what the hell is going on?"

"Dazai and Nakahara have finally decided to stop playing the world's longest game of emotional chicken," says Ranpo, wiping the crumbs from his first doughnut off his face. "It's about time. It was getting exhausting."

"You knew about this?" asks Kunikida, voice a mixture of bewildered and infuriated.

Ranpo snorts, shoving a second doughnut in his mouth. "Please, they were practically screaming each other's names through the radio." He grins up at Dazai as he chews. "Thanks for the doughnuts. Have fun on tour."

"You're welcome," says Dazai with a laugh. It's not surprising that Ranpo is always at least one step ahead.

"So, uh, you've been into Nakahara the entire time?" asks Tanizaki, appearing beside him and looking blatantly nervous.

"Don't worry, Junichiro," says Dazai, patting him on the shoulder consolingly. "I won't tell him all the terrible things you said about him." Even though it would have been greatly

amusing to see Chuuya's reactions.

Tanizaki still looks a little worried, so Dazai shoves a doughnut in his hand to distract him. Then he moves towards Atsushi's desk. Atsushi is watching the commotion with a calm smile on his face, raising his eyebrows at Dazai as he approaches.

"Think you can handle finishing Stray Dogs on your own?" asks Dazai, sitting on top of his desk.

"Don't worry about me, Dazai," says Atsushi confidently. "I've got this. Plus I'm not on my own." He gestures around the room.

"I've got faith in you," says Dazai honestly, giving Atsushi a sincere smile.

Atsushi gives him an answering one. "I liked your performance," he says wryly. "It was brimming with authenticity."

"That it was," agrees Dazai, laughing a little. He's surprised how touched he is by Atsushi's approval, it's like they've reversed roles. "Thanks for all your assistance." He doesn't just mean with sending Chuuya the song.

"Thanks for letting me help," says Atsushi, voice and expression warm. "You're in no danger of turning into a tiger."

It's perhaps the most ridiculous praise Dazai's ever been given. He lights up at it though, patting Atsushi's head in an intentionally annoying way. He's struck by the fact that he's going to truly miss him while he's on tour.

"Watch over Kyouka and Kenji while I'm gone," instructs Dazai, standing up before things have the opportunity to get mushy. "And be nice to that Lucy girl. Chuuya doesn't make idle threats."

Atsushi huffs a laugh, shaking his head. "You look happy, Dazai."

Dazai pauses, giving Atsushi a sly smile. "I plead the fifth," he says breezily, rapping his knuckles on Atsushi's desk in goodbye.

Dazai looks at his own desk, contemplating if he needs anything from it. He ultimately decides he doesn't though, he's sure PMR could scrounge up something if he really needed it anyway. Dazai gives the office a final sweep, disturbed to find he's going to miss the physical location as well.

Dazai pushes aside that revelation to walk towards the door, not surprised to be stopped by Kunikida, who Dazai had always intended to save for last.

"Do you remember when you asked me if I'd ever been in love?" asks Dazai.

"That is not what I asked you," says Kunikida, crossing his arms.

Dazai ignores that. "The moon looks beautiful when I'm with him."

“What nonsense are you talking about?” asks Kunikida, becoming frustrated rather than annoyed.

“Kunikida, you really need to read more,” admonishes Dazai with a sigh. That leaves him with having to put it in much plainer terms, which is unideal but fine if it’s just Kunikida. “You asked me if I had thought at all about my next solo album, and I lied. I don’t want to do another solo album, singing alone no longer appeals to me.”

“I don’t mean to give off the impression I don’t approve,” says Kunikida, expression softening slightly. “It just came as a surprise. You could have mentioned something.”

“It came as a surprise to me as well,” says Dazai with a shrug. “I didn’t know it was reciprocal.”

“Ah,” says Kunikida in understanding. He nods. “Very well. Enjoy the tour then.” He sticks out a hand for Dazai to shake.

Dazai takes it and gives it a firm shake, for once not attempting to mess with him. “Text me about your album if you get stuck.”

“And you’ll actually answer?” asks Kunikida sardonically.

“Eh,” says Dazai flippantly as he walks towards the door, smirking at Kunikida over his shoulder. “Maybe.”

Chuuya actually ends up sleeping for almost the whole flight to New York. He hadn’t realized how exhausted he was after all of the commotion of the last couple days (even if it was good commotion.) He doesn’t wake up until his tour manager, Shohei Ooka, lets him known that they’re landing. Chuuya subtly tries to wipe the drool off his face.

He likes Ooka, the man is exceptional at his job and decent to talk to. It is a little strange to not have Hirotsu as his tour manager for the first time though. Chuuya had jokingly asked him if he was interested back when the tour was being planned, and Hirotsu had looked him in the eye and said there wasn’t enough money in the world for him to take the job.

Ooka also seems to have no interest in prying into Chuuya’s personal life. He hadn’t asked a single question about Dazai or mentioned him crashing his concert last night. It’s made Chuuya like him even more.

He has a bunch of missed calls and texts from others who definitely are interested. The number had gone up a lot as he’d slept. Chuuya snorts when he reads the one from Elise, which is basically just a bunch of party popper emojis and exclamation points.

Kouyou had simply texted him, **Nice to see you two getting along again.** Chuuya texts her back, **Stop gloating.**

Mori had sent him an email telling him about the deal he was negotiating with the ADA for releasing new Double Black music, which had Dazai's name written all over it. But he had kept it strictly to business, no mention of talking points or optics (which also reeks of Dazai.)

Chuuya smiles as he reads it, emailing the boss back that he should try to push for a bigger percentage for PMR, as they would be contributing more to the marketing and using their equipment. There's no way Chuuya is recording in that shack those ADA people call a record company.

Just because he and Dazai are together now doesn't mean he's going to botch a business deal. Chuuya is still a PMR executive.

Lucy's message makes him laugh the hardest though. **You two are so overdramatic. Ever heard of texting? Or, like, speaking in person?**

**Music expresses that which cannot be put into words and that which cannot remain silent,** replies Chuuya.

She answers almost immediately. **Don't quote Victor Hugo at me like you're clever.**

**So I should tell Atsushi you don't like love songs?** sends Chuuya back. Lucy just texts back, **You're being unpleasant.**

Chuuya snorts but puts his phone away so he can get off the plane. New York is distinctly colder than L.A, though the city is always impressive. There's still a lot of time until the show, so Chuuya takes a car to the hotel to get settled in. The place they're staying at is extravagant, as is the norm with PMR.

Chuuya's phone starts ringing as he walks into the door of his hotel room. Tachihara is attempting to video chat with him. It's not the first time he's called. Or the fifth. Chuuya hasn't been intentionally ignoring him, but he knows that Mich is going to want more than a simple text.

He sighs as he swipes to answer the call, putting it off longer wasn't going to make it go away.

Chuuya isn't really surprised to see four faces on the screen when it connects. Tachihara, Gin, and Kajii are sitting on one of the couches in a PMR practice room, and Higuchi is sitting in front of the couch with her back against it. None of them speak though, they all just look at him expectantly.

Chuuya sighs again. "Yeah, me and Dazai are together now."

"Called it!" yells Kajii, starting to cackle at the same time Higuchi says, "Oh my god." Tachihara lets out a loud groan while Gin places a hand on his shoulder and rolls her eyes.

“Why am I the only one who looks even a little bit surprised?” asks Higuchi, turning around to look at the others. Kajii is still laughing while Tachihara is sulking.

“Because you were the only one who wasn’t on the Falling Camellia tour,” says Gin flatly.

“Chuuya was pining personified,” says Kajii in between laughing. He turns to Gin. “Not that you two were much-.”

Kajii’s laughter is cut off as Gin kicks him, sending him flying off the couch and onto Higuchi, who shrieks loudly.

“Come on,” says Gin to Tachihara, ignoring Kajii and Higuchi’s bickering, “Chuuya looks scarily happy.”

“He almost got me sent to jail in *China*,” says Tachihara, crossing his arms stubbornly. “Where they are not exactly a paragon of human rights. And he was such a dick to your brother.”

“I’m aware,” says Gin, tone turning darker. “But, he was also the one to recruit me,” she says with more warmth. “If it weren’t for him, we wouldn’t even know each other.”

Tachihara lets out a long breath. He points a finger in Chuuya’s direction. “You are so fucking lucky I love you so much, man. If I loved you even a *tiny* bit less I would not give that asshole a second chance,” he says, holding up his fingers with minimal space between them.

“Like he cares what you think,” says Kajii, finally untangling himself from Higuchi and rubbing his elbow. Higuchi is still glaring at him.

“Shut up,” says Chuuya shortly. “I do care,” he says to Tachihara. “And I appreciate it. Thanks, Mich.”

“Yeah, yeah,” says Tachihara, waving a hand dismissively. He does flash Chuuya a tiny smile before looking down at Kajii. “Why are you so happy? I thought you couldn’t stand Dazai.”

“What? That dude’s classic,” says Kajii with a wide grin. “The first time I met him he insulted me with a word I had to look up after to even know what it meant. Shit’s hilarious.”

“I still think it’s weird,” says Higuchi, shaking her head. Kajii opens his mouth to say something which is no doubt going to be rude but Tachihara speaks up first.

“We are being *supportive*,” says Tachihara sharply, as if he weren’t completely against it two seconds ago. He gives Higuchi a cold look.

“We are,” chimes in Gin. “Although if he ever hurts you again, you won’t even be able to find the body,” she adds nonchalantly.

“Seconded,” says Tachihara, smirking and fist-bumping her.

“Thirded,” says Kajii easily. “We’ll dance and piss on his grave.”

“Of course,” says Higuchi curtly. She softens to give Chuuya a real smile. Then it turns to a smirk. “Hey, Chuuya, did you know Kajii blushes whenever you play *Tales of Baby Red and the Lemon Fucker*?”

“Ichiyo,” snaps Kajii, face both enraged and horrified.

Chuuya bursts out in laughter, as does everyone but Kajii (who is glaring at all of them.)

It’s a reminder of why he would never leave PMR, or these people. Chuuya would gladly murder anyone who hurt any of them as well. Theirs is a bond filled with arguments and bruises and unbreakable loyalty. Chuuya wouldn’t have it any other way.

“I see that you’re all hard at work,” says a voice from offscreen. Chuuya recognizes it as Hirotsu’s familiar disdain.

“Hey, Gramps,” says Chuuya lightly.

The older man steps forward so he’s visible. “Chuuya,” he greets dryly. “I hope your new relationship is fulfilling, and that you two break less hotel furniture now that you’re older.”

“I wouldn’t hold your breath,” says Tachihara with a snicker. “Chuuya does hold the Port Mafia Records’ title for most broken phones.”

“Hey, he hasn’t broken any this year yet,” points out Gin, though there’s a trace of a smirk on her face as well.

“Yeah, but now he’s going to be living with Dazai,” says Kajii, his smirk completely visible. “He’ll be breaking one every other week, if not more.”

“I hate all of you,” says Chuuya, shaking his head and smiling so wide it almost hurts.

“Unfortunately, we have to get back to recording,” says Hirotsu pointedly, “If we would like to finish this album in the next century.”

“We get it old man,” says Kajii, sighing but standing up. “Later, Baby Red.” The others call out goodbye as well, then the call is ended before Chuuya has the chance to say anything.

Chuuya snorts, putting down his phone and going back to unpacking some things. It isn’t long before he gets another phone call though.

Chuuya feels a flicker of annoyance, but it turns to dread when he reads the name **Ryuunosuke Akutagawa** on the screen. Chuuya doesn’t think Akutagawa has called him more than a handful of times in the entire time they’ve known each other.

Chuuya takes a deep breath then answers. “Ryuu,” he says in a falsely upbeat voice that makes himself cringe. “What’s up?”

“I could use your advice on something,” says Akutagawa, voice stiff and irritated. Although that isn’t out of the ordinary. Him asking Chuuya for advice on the other hand definitely is.

“You’re not calling to ask about Dazai?” asks Chuuya, not sure if he’s confused or relieved.

“I fail to see why that would be relevant to me,” says Akutagawa flatly. His voice turns petulant then. “I’m calling to ask about how to deal with that nightmare Maud Montgomery.”

Chuuya has to swallow a snort. “What seems to be the problem?”

“You’ve met her,” says Akutagawa haughtily. “I’m sure you can extrapolate.”

“You’re not going to like my advice,” says Chuuya mildly. He genuinely likes the both of them, but it’s hard for him to imagine them collaborating. But it had been Mori’s idea, and he’d never known Mori to be wrong.

“I don’t care if I like it as long as it’s useful,” says Akutagawa, sounding a bit tired.

“It’s usually easier to write with someone if you know them, understand them a little,” says Chuuya. “My advice would be to try not writing, spend some time together.”

“That’s the most sentimental drivel I’ve ever heard,” says Akutagawa plainly.

“I warned you,” says Chuuya, not offended or surprised by his response.

Akutagawa makes a frustrated sound. “Very well. Not that I think it’ll work.”

“Good luck,” offers Chuuya. Akutagawa grunts and hangs up.

Chuuya smiles and shakes his head, collapsing on the large hotel bed and putting down his phone. He looks at the ceiling, wondering how long it’s going to take Dazai to get back. Chuuya is shamefully eager to see him again. It’s like a song he can’t get out of his head.

Luckily there’s a knock on his door then, probably Ooka or someone he’d sent to fetch him to head to the venue. Chuuya doesn’t hesitate to answer it. Dazai might not be here, but playing music has always been his favorite distraction.

While Dazai is able to handle his business at PMR and the ADA relatively quickly, packing and traveling take infuriatingly long. Dazai had spent more money on his plane ticket than he had in months to get on the earliest possible flight, and he still doesn’t get to New York until late that evening. Time zones could be so inconvenient.

Dazai decides to go to the hotel rather than where Chuuya is playing. He’s probably just wrapping up anyway. It’s also amusing to walk up to the front desk and ask for a key to Chuuya Nakahara’s room. The woman who hands him the key’s eyes are comically large.

He's impressed at the room as he enters. His accommodations when he'd toured with Kunikida hadn't been shabby, but they'd never scored a view like this. The city looks both huge and small from this high up.

Dazai flops onto the bed, closing his eyes for a moment. He's basically been running on adrenaline the past forty eight hours. If he were waiting on anyone other than Chuuya he'd go to sleep right now. But he is undoubtably worth the sleep deprivation, so Dazai pulls out his phone and starts playing the pizza tycoon game he and Ranpo have been competing at lately.

He's just about to expand his territory when the door flies open. Chuuya walks into the room, looking tired himself. He stands up straighter when he notices Dazai though.

"If we're going to be together, you have to do something for me," says Chuuya, approaching the bed with crossed arms.

"What now?" asks Dazai with a whine. He'd anticipated their reunion being a bit more cordial. He wouldn't have opposed to Chuuya jumping him.

"You need to apologize to Tachihara about Beijing," says Chuuya giving Dazai a flat look. "I can't keep hearing about it for the rest of our lives."

Dazai sits up at that. On the one hand, he is not sorry and still maintains that it had been very funny. But Chuuya had just used the phrase "the rest of our lives," and Dazai is a little inundated by how much he wants that to be the case. In light of that, apologizing to Tachihara seems a trivial price to pay.

"Fine," he says with a long sigh.

Chuuya shakes his head, but Dazai catches the trace of a smile on his face as he turns to grab something from the room's mini fridge.

Chuuya pulls out two water bottles and tosses one at Dazai. The significance of the gesture is not lost on him. His cheeks feel hot, and he scowls as Chuuya laughs at him.

"How did things go with the ADA?" asks Chuuya, jumping onto the bed next to him and sitting cross-legged. His knee is practically resting on top of Dazai's. "Any problems?"

"Nope," says Dazai easily, playing with the water bottle in his hands absentmindedly and leaning into the closeness.

"Did you see Kyouka there?" asks Chuuya, taking a long drink from his own water. He'd always needed to guzzle water after a show, and that was when he hadn't been the only one singing.

"No, she was still at school," answers Dazai, a little lost why Chuuya is asking. Then he looks at Chuuya with raised eyebrows. "You still talk to Kyouka?" His voice is slightly incredulous.

"Of course," says Chuuya, looking equally surprised he didn't know. "All the time."



Dazai blinks. “She’s never mentioned still speaking to anyone from Port Mafia Records once in the last six months.” He can’t believe he was so easily duped by a fifteen year old girl.

Chuuya starts laughing, putting a hand on Dazai’s shoulder to steady himself. “Maybe she did learn something working at PMR after all.”

Dazai rolls his eyes. He is slightly impressed though. Maybe he hadn’t been giving Kyouka enough credit.

Even the exhilaration of seeing Chuuya isn’t able to keep Dazai from feeling tired though. He tosses his water bottle to the floor and leans his head on Chuuya’s shoulder. “Missed you,” he says quietly.

“It hasn’t even been a day,” points out Chuuya. His hand comes up to run through Dazai’s hair lightly. “Me too,” he adds, voice content.

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### **February, Three Weeks Since the Release of Arahabaki**

“Did you have a theme for the album? There’s so many conflicting styles and messages,” says Emily Dickinson, the reporter interviewing him.

Chuuya has done so many interviews the past couple weeks that they’re all starting to blur together, but this one has been one of the least taxing. Dickinson has been kind but sharp, and seems genuinely interested in understanding his musical process.

“I knew that I wanted it to be honest,” answers Chuuya. “My favorite type of music has always been the kind I can relate to in some way, regardless if the song is fast or slow or whatever genre. So I wanted to write music that displayed that same level of vulnerability.”

“Well, I think I can safely say you accomplished what you set out to do,” says Dickinson good-naturedly. “Bygone Days has been a monumental success so far. People are calling it the album of the year already, and it’s only February.”

“It’s been really rewarding to see the reaction to it,” says Chuuya with a smile. He does occasionally get to be honest during these things.

“Are you aware of your fans’ new tradition where they mandate that you must play *Swan Song* after listening to *I’m Not Allowed To Comment on Ongoing Port Mafia Records’ Legal Disputes, But-?*” asks Dickinson, sounding faintly amused.

Dazai had recorded and released *Swan Song* in his free time while Chuuya had been busy with press and other tour business. It had shot to the top of the charts quickly, although it isn’t overshadowing Bygone Days. If anything it’s helping (a fact that Chuuya is sure is not lost on Mori despite him never mentioning it.)

Chuuya is still a little thrown off whenever he hears it, at Dazai’s openness and he’s also just impressed by the song in general. It’s the opposite of boring and predictable (Dazai had snickered when he’d told him that. Then he’d clung to Chuuya like an octopus.)

“As long as they listen to my song first,” says Chuuya easily, shrugging a little.

Dickson laughs lightly. “Thank you for your time,” she says, sticking out a hand to shake. “And congratulations on the album.”

“Thank you,” replies Chuuya, shaking her hand and maintaining his smile until he exits the room.

He sighs and stretches as soon as he’s in the clear. He hadn’t had to do as many interviews before the scheduled tour had started, but now his itinerary is jam-packed. Chuuya knows it’s a good thing that people are still so invested in him after he hadn’t release music for so long, but he doesn’t think he’s ever going to enjoy interviews.

The tour on the other hand has been incredible. The audiences have been full of energy, and Chuuya has never had more fun performing. It’s exhilarating, and he’s soaking up every second of it.

But he’d appreciate having a bit more free time off stage. He hadn’t anticipated having someone else tagging along during the planning stages of the tour though. So he and Dazai are trying to make the best of it. Chuuya mostly gets worried that Dazai will be bored. But he’s never complained, and he just gets annoyed when Chuuya asks him about it.

Chuuya finds Dazai sitting on a couch in a different room backstage, playing some game on his phone. Dazai is staring at it with deep concentration. He looks up when he hears Chuuya approaching.

“Chibi,” greets Dazai cheerfully. Chuuya gives him a sour look and sinks onto the couch next to him. Dazai immediately puts his feet in his lap. Chuuya contemplates throwing them off but allows it.

“It’s your turn,” says Dazai, nudging him with one of his feet.

“It feels like it’s always my turn,” complains Chuuya. “Where was I?”

“It’s not my fault you did more things than I did,” says Dazai, settling into the arm of the couch. “I could tell you another thrilling story about all the books I read at Santoka’s.”

“I still can’t believe you lived with a cop,” says Chuuya, shaking his head.

“You *dated* a cop,” points out Dazai. He’d been dumbfounded when Chuuya had mentioned that the first time, mostly at how Mori would have allowed it.

“First of all, she was a detective,” clarifies Chuuya, pointing a finger at Dazai. “Second of all, I dated her for a couple months. You lived with Taneda for *years*.”

“He wants to meet you,” says Dazai with the hint of a smile. “Have you over for dinner.”

“I have to meet him. I have to meet Oda. I have to meet all your little agency freaks,” lists Chuuya irritably. “I’m not forcing you to meet anyone,” he points out.

“I already know everyone,” says Dazai with a shrug. “And I’ve got more work cut out for me. All your friends already have vendettas against me.”

“Vendettas which you have earned,” says Chuuya with no sympathy.

Not that Dazai had sounded annoyed really, if anything he sounds a little intrigued by the puzzle of how to alleviate the numerous grudges he’d accumulated. He’d already apologized to Tachihara, who had told Dazai he could “make it up to him.” Which is an ominous concept, but Mich refuses to tell Chuuya anything about it.

“You were in Marseilles,” says Dazai, nudging Chuuya with his foot again. “Kajii hadn’t gotten there yet.”

“Right,” says Chuuya, reaching for one of Dazai’s hands and trying to get comfortable. “Those French bastards were starting to come around to respecting me. Not that I could really tell, as my French was shit.”

“I have something to tell you,” says Dazai as soon as Chuuya steps out of the bathroom.

He’s not actually trying to ambush Chuuya, it’s so that Dazai doesn’t give himself the opportunity to put this conversation off anymore. Dazai knows himself, and he knows his tendencies to evade certain topics.

Dazai is trying to rid himself of that habit, at least with Chuuya. He’d thought it would have been easy after sharing his scars, figuratively and literally, but it still requires some effort. It’s never been a matter of trust, but more that Dazai doesn’t think he’ll ever enjoy exposing himself.

But he doesn’t need to enjoy it to do it. Plus it doesn’t feel as insurmountable when it’s Chuuya. Chuuya hasn’t held back at all these past couple weeks when he’s described what he’d done in their time apart, not even when it had been slightly uncomfortable talking about how pissed off he’d been after Dazai had left.

To be able to talk to Chuuya like this isn’t something that Dazai is taking for granted, not after he’d gone so long without it. He’d missed it almost as much as he’d missed making music together. Dazai has made more genuine friends than he’d even thought he’d have these past years, but none of those bonds have made him feel this comfortable, this understood.

So Dazai will keep pushing himself to reveal things even when he doesn’t have to. If that necessitates springing things on his boyfriend without warning so be it.

Chuuya pauses in the doorway, still toweling off his hair. Then he sighs, tossing the towel aside and giving Dazai a slightly vexed look. “There are less jarring ways of starting a conversation, mackerel,” he says dryly.

“I think it’s one of those essential things,” says Dazai, keeping his voice as neutral as possible. He keeps expression blank as well.

Chuuya immediately shifts from annoyed to serious, coming to sit next to Dazai on the bed. Dazai is always impressed by how he manages to look interested but nonthreatening at the same time. It’s a very Chuuya expression. He looks Dazai in the eyes and waits for him to speak.

“The other day I told you about how I picked my ghostwriting name,” says Dazai, frowning a little.

He’d never talked to anybody about this before besides Santoka, and that had been different. Dazai doesn’t really have a label for what the man is to him, and he’d told him more on instinct than anything. The subject of Dazai’s real name is complicated because it’s connected to his family, and while he rarely thinks about them, it’s impossible to avoid the clear distaste he feels towards them when talking about this.

There’s also the fact that Chuuya had told him about his own false name when they were teenagers. But Dazai had been actively trying not to get too caught up in Chuuya those days (albeit not very successfully.) Now that he’d happily surrendered that battle, he could do the same.

But it wouldn’t be out of the realm of possibility for Chuuya to be slightly indignant about the concealment up to this point.

“I neglected to mention that Osamu Dazai isn’t my birth name,” says Dazai calmly after a moment, trying to hide that his hands are fidgeting a little, “That my original name was Osamu Tsushima.”

He watches Chuuya’s face as he process the information, his eyebrows narrowing and slight frown. He doesn’t look angry exactly though, if anything he looks a bit confused. Instead of easing Dazai’s nerves it makes them worse. His heartbeat is a little rapid when Chuuya finally speaks.

“So does this mean I have to stop calling you Dazai?” asks Chuuya, voice wary. “Because it’s going to be pretty fucking weird at this point to have to switch, but I’ll do it if that’s what you want.”

Dazai lets out a sharp laugh, practically tackling Chuuya to the bed. “No, Dazai is fine,” he says blithely.

“It’s a big decision,” says Elise, fiddling with the straw in her vanilla milkshake. “Picking a college is an investment in your future.”

“Did you get that from a fucking pamphlet?” asks Chuuya, rolling his eyes. He’s only about halfway through his own chocolate shake.

They’re sitting on the balcony of his and Dazai’s hotel room in Greensboro, North Carolina. Elise and Lucy had come out together to see a show. Elise had been excited about it for weeks, she’d been texting Chuuya constantly (Chuuya seriously wonders if she’s that good at texting in class or if her teachers just don’t give a shit.)

She’d also been texting him about college. Elise has been struggling over picking a school for a while now. It’s unlike her to be so indecisive. Usually her and Mori are alike in this regard, they make their choices and never look back. But every time Chuuya talks to her about it she’s extremely wishy washy. It’s been concerning, but Chuuya hadn’t been able to get a real answer out of her over the phone.

After Elise and Lucy had arrived and they’d done some catching up, Chuuya had not so casually asked Elise to get ice cream with him so that he could corner her to talk about it (he’d left Dazai with Lucy and hopes they’re being at the very least unhostile).

“Shut up,” says Elise tersely.

“Elise,” says Chuuya, giving her a flat look. “Cut the bullshit. What’s the real issue?”

Elise sighs heavily. “It’s complicated.”

Chuuya doesn’t bother replying to that, just sips his milkshake as he waits for her to talk. He’s not an extremely patient person by nature, but he’s learned the power of silence over the years.

“Fine, I may have an idea of where I’d like to go,” says Elise, putting down her ice cream and crossing her arms. “But Mori hasn’t exactly been subtle in conveying that he’d prefer that I pick a school in Los Angeles.”

“Since when do you do what Mori tells you?” asks Chuuya, raising an eyebrow.

Elise looks away from him and out towards the city below, a startlingly melancholic expression on her face. “Everyone I love is in L.A,” she says quietly. “How can I leave all of them?”

“There’s nothing wrong with wanting to be close to the people that you love,” says Chuuya, also speaking quieter. “But love is not bound by physical proximity.” She looks at him again, and he smiles at her. “We’ve lived on different continents many times these past years, has it made you care about me less?”

“I still missed you,” says Elise, no less morose. “And this time it won’t just be you.”

“That’s true, but this time it’ll be you who’s off pursuing your ambitions,” says Chuuya, smile growing wider. “I’ll miss having you around, but I and everyone else who loves you want you to go after what you want.” His smile becomes wry. “Even Mori.”

“Do you think he’ll be lonely?” asks Elise, looking worried in a different way.

Chuuya blinks, he usually doesn’t think of the boss as someone who experiences things like loneliness. “Well, I’ll keep an eye on him,” he offers.

Elise doesn’t look appeased. “You’re close, Chuuya. Not that close.”

“I meant that I’ll watch for signs of it and let you know to call him when I see them,” clarifies Chuuya with a small laugh. He has no desire to ever broach the subject of *loneliness* with Mori himself.

Elise snorts a little too. “That might work.”

“I’m sure he’ll drop whatever he’s doing the second you call him,” says Chuuya with a wide grin. “Plus if you ever really get homesick, all you’d have to do is say the word and the PMR jet would be there.”

“You’ve made your point,” says Elise, rolling her eyes but smiling too. “I might need your help breaking the news to Mori.”

“Anything for my best girl,” says Chuuya easily, hiding the horror he feels at that prospect. Well, at least he’ll get to do it from a different state if it comes to it. He changes the subject so that he doesn’t have to think about it more. “So where do you want to go?”

“Yale,” says Elise, tone turning excited. She grabs her milkshake again, now drinking it instead of playing with it.

Elise definitely had the grades to get into Yale, even if Mori hadn’t been her guardian. She’d had years of prestigious tutors before going to her elite private high school. Elise had been at the top of her class with little effort for years.

“Pretentious,” taunts Chuuya lightly. She just rolls her eyes. “What for?”

“I haven’t decided for sure,” she says with a shrug. “I’ve thought about medicine, being a doctor like my dad. Or a pediatric psychiatrist, helping kids with trauma.” She smirks at Chuuya. “Then there’s always business.”

“Following in Mori’s footsteps?” asks Chuuya, smiling and raising his eyebrows. “He’ll be so proud.”

“If you tell him you’ll regret him,” warns Elise. She finishes off the last of her milkshake. “Let’s go back inside and make sure Lucy hasn’t attempted to murder your boyfriend.”

Chuuya laughs, standing up and walking towards the door. He ruffles Elise's hair like he'd used to, though he has to reach to do it now. She scowls and bats his hand away, wrenching the door open and walking inside.

*"When I can call like that to him across space—I belong to him,"* comes Lucy's voice, playing from her phone. She's holding it in front of her so that Dazai can listen. *"He doesn't love me—he never will—but I belong to him."*

"You and Akutagawa wrote this?" asks Dazai over the song, clearly in disbelief. Lucy turns off the song with a short laugh.

"They figured it out after the night they went out and got horrifically drunk together," says Elise, laughing a little herself. She takes a seat next to Lucy on the loveseat in the room, the girls exchange amused looks.

"It was Chuuya's idea," says Lucy, smirking at Chuuya as he walks over to take a seat on the other couch next to Dazai.

"I said to get to know each other," says Chuuya, rolling his eyes. "Not get wasted."

"Semantics," says Lucy, waving a hand dismissively. "He revealed things he doesn't want other people to know. So did I. Blackmail has a way of bringing people together."

"Chuuya, did you know that Lucy reads?" asks Dazai, poking at him in excitement.

"Nerd," says Chuuya automatically, sneering at Lucy and shoving Dazai's finger away from him.

"Sorry I was stuck at an orphanage without many options for entertainment," says Lucy sardonically.

"Couldn't you have brought Kyouka instead?" Chuuya asks Elise, who looks entertained watching them. Any heaviness from earlier has evaporated completely.

"Kyouka had a big chemistry test to study for," says Elise with a light shrug. "She was complaining how she was surrounded by musical geniuses but that no one could help her with stoichiometry."

"I actually know a song about science!" says Dazai cheerfully. He smiles at Chuuya. "You remember it, don't you, chibi? I taught it to you before your GED test!"

"Sing a single line and you will be sleeping outside tonight," threatens Chuuya. It had taken him weeks to get that abomination out of his head.

"Has anyone ever told the two of you that you're more than a little nauseating?" asks Lucy, rolling her eyes.

Chuuya throws a pillow at her without stopping glaring at Dazai.

*“The only music I’m interested in making after this,”* sings Dazai emphatically, half at the crowd and half at Chuuya, *“Is if I get to make it with you.”*

*“And not that it’s a competition, but I definitely loved you first,”* finishes Dazai with a flourish, having to hold in a laugh as the audience sings the line with him. Chuuya is rolling his eyes.

Dazai had started performing *Swan Song* at Chuuya’s shows not long after he’d officially released the song. His unease about playing the song has mostly faded by this point, and there’s multiple benefits to playing it. It’s boosting sales, and more importantly it allows Dazai to spend some time on stage with Chuuya.

Dazai doubts he’ll ever get bored of listening to Chuuya sing *Bygone Days*, but he does sometimes wish they could get to the part where they get to perform together again. They’ve done a handful of duets while on tour, mostly old classics or the occasional Double Black song (though never *Corruption*, which if Dazai has his way they will never perform again.)

But Dazai’s main motivation for singing *Swan Song* is that it provides the rare opportunity to fluster Chuuya. It’s hilarious watching him try to remain calm and unaffected during the song. Then it’s also payback for how often Chuuya seems to effortlessly fluster Dazai himself these days. Dazai should have placed his affections with someone less fiendishly compelling.

“Are you done?” asks Chuuya as Dazai bows and waves to the cheering audience.

“Now, now, don’t be jealous,” says Dazai airily, half-smirking at Chuuya. He walks over towards his position on the piano.

Chuuya meets him halfway, looking amused rather than annoyed. “Feel like singing another song?” he asks casually.

Dazai fights not to react. Every other time they’ve sang together Chuuya had asked first if he’d wanted to. “What were you thinking?” he asks in an equally nonchalant tone.

“You’ll see,” says Chuuya, a devious look in his eyes.

He nods towards his band, and Dazai freezes as he recognizes the upbeat tune after mere seconds. He’s listened to it enough times in his life that he could never forget it. He has no idea when Chuuya had the time to teach it to his entire band, he and Dazai spend almost all of his very limited free time together.

*“It’s a Friday,”* sings Chuuya gleefully, bopping along to the music obnoxiously. *“And it’s been a hell of a week.”*



Dazai is almost smiling too wide to sing the next line. “*Feels like I’ve been stuck in a losing streak,*” he sings with just as much enthusiasm.

They face each other for the next lines, swaying like fools and belting out, “*But tonight is the night we turn it around. There’s not a thing that can keep me down.*”

They go all out on the chorus, practically screaming the words as they dance along to the routine they’d memorized at sixteen. Neither of them falter in the steps.

*So turn down the lights, and turn up the music*

*Tell all your friends, tell everyone*

*Dance ’til your feet are covered in bruises*

*We’ll keep going ’til we see the sun*

“*Cuz life is better,*” sings Dazai loudly, sweeping his arm dramatically.

“*Life’s just better,*” echoes Chuuya, oversinging the line with abandon.

“*Life is better, better, better,*” they sing together, pointing in the air with each better and jumping up and down.

“*Life’s better with a little party in it,*” sings Chuuya in a low voice, winking at the crowd.

The audience is howling in laughter, but Dazai thinks he’s laughing the hardest. He keeps thinking to himself, *I can’t possibly be any happier.* But he keeps being proven wrong. Leave it to Chuuya to always defy his expectations.

They sing the rest of the number almost as a competition as to who can go more over the top. Dazai is rolling on the stage at one point while Chuuya leaps in the air. It’s the most ridiculous performance Dazai has ever witnessed, and the most fun.

They’re both out of breath when they finish, striking dramatic poses and smiling at each other. The crowd is cheering them on heartily, and even Chuuya’s band looks bemused.

“I can not believe you did this to me in public,” says Dazai with his microphone turned off as they continue to yell. His tone comes out still breathless and blatantly enthralled.

“C’mon, mackerel,” says Chuuya smugly, also clearly winded. “It’s your favorite song.”

Dazai doesn’t think before grabbing him and kissing him decisively in front of everyone, almost lifting Chuuya in the air with the force of it. It’s just starting to get indecent when Dazai pulls away, and Chuuya is visibly flushed.

“I will get you back for this,” warns Dazai lightly, collecting himself and starting to walk offstage.

“Looking forward to it,” shoots back Chuuya easily. He looks incredibly pleased with himself.

“Have a great rest of the show, babe,” calls out Dazai loudly as he flicks his mic back on. “Watch those high notes!”

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### **Early March, One and a Half Months Since the Release of Arahabaki**

It takes Chuuya a moment to realize what’s going on when Dazai shakes him awake. Chuuya is breathing a little hard as he comes to, then things click as he sees the miserable expression on Dazai’s face. It feels like it’s almost been a lifetime since they’d been in this situation.

But while Chuuya has nightmares increasingly less frequently, they have not departed from his life completely. Chuuya is a little doubtful they ever will. Accepting his humanity is one thing, his stark memory of the accident is another. He doesn’t know how you’d ever forget something like that.

“I had naively hoped you didn’t have these any more,” says Dazai quietly, pushing Chuuya’s hair out of his face gently.

“Sorry,” says Chuuya, voice a little rough.

“Please never apologize to me for this again,” says Dazai, shaking his head vehemently. He scoots closer to Chuuya, looking him in the eyes. “I was never very good at articulating when we were younger how they made me feel. I didn’t know how to come up with the words to explain how much I wanted to somehow take that pain away from you.”

“You can’t take away someone else’s pain, Dazai,” Chuuya tells him, smiling lightly. It’s a very Dazai thing to want to do though.

“I can sure as hell try,” says Dazai, his voice somewhat angry.

“It’s my pain, idiot,” says Chuuya warmly. “And I wouldn’t want you to take it even if it were possible, then you’d just be stuck with it.” He grabs one of Dazai’s hands and links their fingers together. “I’d rather you just help me bear it, like you always have.”

“It still doesn’t feel like enough,” says Dazai forlornly, looking at their clasped hands.

“There is nothing about my life that I would change,” says Chuuya, no hint of doubt in his words. “Not anything that I’ve been through. Because it’s all lead to who am I right now. And I’m satisfied with that,” he says with confidence, shrugging lightly.

“I think if I tried to write a song about everything I love about you, that one song would be long enough for an entire album,” says Dazai without shame, looking at him with unmasked admiration.

Chuuya snorts. “Good thing we’re going to be writing as a duo from now on so we don’t have to sick that monstrosity on the world.”

“Would it kill you to be a little romantic once in your life?” asks Dazai, frowning and giving him an unimpressed look. He tries to take his hand back.

“I wrote you a god damn love song,” Chuuya reminds him, not letting him out of his grip. His voice softens. “And romance is one thing, but that’s never been as important to me as everything else you are to me.” He squeezes Dazai’s hand, smiling at him serenely. “I don’t love you because of any romantic crap, I love you because you are the person who I want by my side through whatever comes. I love you because even when I was furious with you I still trusted you more than anyone else in the world. I love you because you call me on my shit and force me to try and be a better person, a better musician. I love you because my music is best when I’m writing it with you. I love you because...well, I could probably fill more than an album,” finishes Chuuya with a small laugh.

His laughter fades as he looks at Dazai. “Are you *crying*?” he asks him incredulously. Chuuya can’t recall ever seeing Dazai cry before.

“Shut up,” says Dazai staunchly, turning away but unable to hide the bright sheen in his eyes.

“Dazai.” Chuuya uses his free hand to try to get him to face him again.

Dazai is looking at him with a serious expression when he does. “Love doesn’t even feel like an adequate enough word to describe how I feel about you, Chuuya Nakahara,” he says ardently, voice cracking a little but resolute.

Fuck, now Chuuya feels his own eyes start to water. “How about partner?” offers Chuuya shakily.

“Yeah,” whispers Dazai, leaning forward and resting their foreheads together, “That fits perfectly.”

Dazai watches Chuuya get ready for the day with a slight frown from his spot on one of the lavish armchairs in their hotel room. He’s tried to ignore it, but something has been weighing on him ever since Chuuya’s nightmare a week ago. It had made Dazai realize that despite talking almost constantly since reuniting, there is a subject they haven’t touched on much.

Dazai is caught between wanting to be there for Chuuya and not wanting to pry. Chuuya had never asked Dazai about the subjects he avoided speaking about. But Chuuya had also never faulted Dazai for asking him anything, and if he didn’t want to talk about something he’d never been anything less than blunt in saying so.

They've gotten into a couple disagreements while on tour, the biggest one being when Dazai had snapped at Chuuya to stop asking him if he was bored. They'd had a bit of a screaming match. Dazai had ended it by yelling that he just wanted to be where Chuuya was. It would have been embarrassing if Chuuya hadn't thrown his arms around him so tightly it had been slightly painful. Chuuya hasn't asked him if he's bored since.

He's still debating what to do when Chuuya steps in front of him, giving him a searching look. "What's wrong?" he asks plainly.

"Nothing," says Dazai, which is both true and not true.

Chuuya narrows his eyes. "What's wrong?"

Dazai sighs lightly. He'd always been rather terrible at fooling Chuuya, and now it's almost impossible to get anything past him. It's equally irritating and useful.

"We never talk about your mother," says Dazai carefully, trying to convey he has no preference for whether they discuss it or not.

Chuuya flinches a little, his hands fidgeting at his sides. "And?"

"And nothing," says Dazai definitively. "Forget I brought it up."

Chuuya doesn't ease up though. He looks at the floor with a dark expression. "It's not that I don't want to talk about her," he says after a moment, tone hard to understand. "I just don't really know what to say." He looks up, biting his lip. "I don't forgive her or excuse what she did to me, but sometimes I wonder if things could have been different."

"Different how?" asks Dazai, trying to keep his tone impassive.

"Arthur once said he wished I'd gotten to know the other sides of her," says Chuuya, voice somewhere between wistful and disappointed.

Dazai thinks he's going to continue speaking, but he doesn't. He just stays quiet and introspective. Dazai tentatively reaches out to take his hand and tug him closer. Chuuya doesn't resist, coming forward and trying to squeeze onto the armchair with him.

It takes a moment to rearrange themselves so that Chuuya's elbow isn't digging into his gut. Once they do Chuuya is half in his lap, expression still a little heavy.

Dazai sighs and leans his head against the back of the chair. "It is possible," he says slowly, "In the years since I left PMR that I spent the anniversary of your mother's death visiting her grave and telling her what a terrible person she is."

"You *what*?" asks Chuuya, looking at Dazai in bewilderment.

"Well, grave desecration charges are nothing to scoff at," says Dazai, shrugging and shifting the both of them with the motion. "And I took quite the pay cut when I left, so I had to settle for verbal assault."

“Why?” Chuuya still looks more confused than anything.

“She hurt you,” says Dazai simply. “I hate her.”

Chuuya stares at him for a long moment, and Dazai starts to get a little worried. Then Chuuya says abruptly, “Move in with me. When we get back to L.A.”

Now Dazai is the one staring in confusion. “What?”

“I should have asked you when we were fucking sixteen,” says Chuuya, almost laughing. He smiles at Dazai widely. “Move in with me.” It’s more of a demand this time.

“Alright then,” says Dazai lightly. “Although we’ll have to look for places that allow dogs.”

Chuuya looks torn between hitting him and kissing him. Dazai makes the decision for him, grabbing his face and pressing their lips together firmly, grinning into the kiss. He somehow keeps getting handed everything he’s ever wanted, but he’s not going to start complaining (Chuuya would probably actually hit him if he did.)

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### **April 29th, Three Months Since the Release of Arahabaki**

There are few things Dazai genuinely misses about PMR. The jet is one of them. It had been hard to get used to flying with the masses when he and Kunikida had gone on their joint tour (Kunikida had called him pampered when he’d whined about it.)

But now that Dazai is with Chuuya he no longer has to have cramped legs and stale peanuts while he’s in the air. He’s lounging in one of the comfortable chairs on the window side now, legs stretched out over Chuuya’s lap and hanging into the aisle.

“Are we almost there?” asks Chuuya a little shortly. He’d never been very enthusiastic about flying.

“You heard the pilot,” says Dazai with a shrug. “We’re taking a detour to avoid some weather.”

“Can’t believe I have to spend my birthday stuck on a freaking plane,” mutters Chuuya irritably.

Dazai sits up, grinning at Chuuya widely. “Street fighter?”

Chuuya raises his eyebrows, pulling out his phone with a tiny smirk. “Oh, you’re on.”

Dazai had suggested it as a way to distract Chuuya, but he’s horrified to learn that Chuuya has gotten even better at the game over the years. Dazai almost gets decimated. Chuuya looks delighted as he stomps Dazai into the ground virtually. It feels like they’d just started to play when the pilot announces that they’re landing.

“I want a rematch,” says Dazai, attempting to not sound petulant but not really pulling it off.

“Maybe you shouldn’t spend so much time playing that dumb pizza game,” says Chuuya with a snicker.

Dazai gives him a dirty look. Ranpo had just expanded his empire again, Dazai is barely keeping up. It’s going to be difficult to fit getting better at Street Fighter into his schedule. But Dazai has dealt with larger problems.

“Hey,” says Dazai brightly as they’re grabbing their things, “I heard Salt Lake City has a restaurant that serves wings in trolley carts.”

“People in Utah are so fucking weird,” says Chuuya, snorting a little. Chuuya’s phone goes off, but he ignores it. He’s been getting constant calls and texts all day.

Dazai had been both surprised and not surprised when he’d first found out Chuuya had agreed to play a concert on his birthday. Chuuya had a habit of being oddly selfless when it came to these sorts of things. His reptile friends had seemed more upset about it than he had, griping about how their annual trip was being ruined.

Dazai has stayed silent on the subject. He has his own plans involving today, which Chuuya seems to be aware of. He’s been watching him all day, as if he’s waiting for Dazai to spring something on him. Dazai has had to stop himself from laughing about it multiple times.

“It can’t be worse than your birthday dinner in Beijing,” says Dazai as he leads the way off the plane, walking into the warm air and sunshine. The sounds and smells of home surround him as he turns around to see Chuuya’s reaction.

“We’re in L.A.,” says Chuuya blankly, pausing in the doorway and looking around like he can’t quite believe what’s he’s seeing. He blinks a couple more times then looks down at Dazai, expression still lost.

“Sorry it took a while,” says Dazai lightly, having to fight off a smile. “But we can finally do your birthday in Los Angeles.”

“What the fuck,” says Chuuya, not moving from the doorway. He looks torn between multiple different emotions. “I have a concert tonight.”

“Oh, I had that rescheduled ages ago,” says Dazai, waving a hand dismissively. He really is trying not to lie to Chuuya anymore, but he thinks this is a worthy exception.

“You what?” Chuuya finally starts descending the stairs, expression still a little stupefied. “You don’t even work for PMR anymore!”

“Mori owed me a favor,” says Dazai with a shrug. Mori had actually agreed with surprisingly little effort. Dazai supposes he could have asked for more. Though he can’t think of anything else he actually wants.

“You absolute menace,” says Chuuya, tone both furious and ecstatic. He’s smiling enormously as he points at Dazai threateningly. “I will get you back for this in June, I swear to fucking God.”

“Chop chop, little doggie,” says Dazai, clapping his hands. “Let’s get to the beach.” He starts to walk away from the tarmac.

Chuuya stops him though, grabbing his shoulders and yanking him down to kiss him, a slow and sweet and toe-curling show of affection. “Thank you,” he breathes out against his lips. “You god damn mackerel piece of shit.”

“Happy birthday, slug,” says Dazai quietly, stroking a hand through Chuuya’s hair.

“Yeah, yeah,” says Chuuya with a huff. His smile hasn’t lessened at all as he lets go of Dazai’s shoulders, he’s beaming a little. Chuuya quickly grabs one of Dazai’s hands and drags him towards his waiting car (courtesy of some coordination with Kouyou.)

Dazai has never been to the beach house PMR owns before, but Chuuya walks in like he owns the place. He’s laughing as he leads them into the kitchen.

“The last time I was here was with Kajii,” says Chuuya, smiling and shaking his head. “I punched him in the face and then we spent the rest of the weekend getting shitfaced.”

Chuuya changes quickly into jeans and a t-shirt then complains that Dazai is taking too long. He almost tears Dazai’s arm out of the socket as he pulls him onto the beach. Chuuya plops down onto the sand immediately, looking completely at peace. It’s good weather for April, even Dazai isn’t cold.

Dazai takes a seat beside him, stretching his legs out and leaning back on his hands. Chuuya shifts so he’s lying with his head on Dazai’s thighs. Dazai frowns at him for getting him full of sand. Chuuya rolls his eyes and reaches for one of Dazai’s hands, holding it in his own and resting them on his chest.

They lay there for a moment, soaking in the sun. It’s silent except for the sound of the breeze and the waves. Dazai had often thought if he were forced to live in a single moment for the rest of his life, it would be in a karaoke bar in Yokohama at age fifteen. But this might take that spot.

“God, it’s too fucking quiet,” declares Chuuya suddenly. He turns to look at him, his huge grin not matching his harsh tone. “Turn on some music.”

## Chapter End Notes

notes! last call for notes!

- The End's Not Near, It's Here is actually the title of the OC series finale before any of you start to think i'm clever
- me @ me: how many callbacks do you want this chapter? me answering me: yes
- “The sun's gone dim, and the moon's turned black. For I loved him, and he didn't love back.” -Dorothy Parker, Two

- raise your hand if you called Atsushi sending Chuuya the song
- Atsushi in Dazai's apartment: bitch you live like this?
- while i intermittently worked on Chuuya's love song throughout writing this fic, i scrapped everything i had for Dazai's and started from scratch. that thing plagued me for a Long Time. kid just won't fricking emote!
- swan song: a metaphorical phrase for a final gesture, effort, or performance given just before death or retirement
- "The weak fear happiness itself" and "What uneasiness lies in being loved" are both taken from Osamu Dazai's No Longer Human
- i still prefer writing emotional intimacy compared to physical, but i am out here Doing My Best
- someone once described chapter 6 as an angst bomb, and i've thought of this chapter of sort of a fluff bomb.
- me: am i being too sappy? \*pauses and remembers all the shit i put them through\*
- me: eh, they've earned it
- Jane Eyre is of course a romance novel
- Dazai vs Mori is both a capstone of Dazai's character arc and an ode to one of my fav characters to write in this fic (i know Mori is such a Bastard but he was so fucking fun to write )
- "Please, they were practically screaming each other's names through the radio."  
\*roll credits\*
- To plead the fifth means to refuse to answer a question, especially in a criminal trial, on the grounds that you might incriminate yourself.
- Shohei Ooka: published a poetry journal with RL Chuuya called Hakuchigun (Group of Idiots). He also wrote a biography about Chuuya
- "The moon is beautiful, isn't it?" is a more poetic way of saying I love you in Japanese
- the TBL scene is both 1) a loving send off to some of my fav characters and relationships in this fic and 2) blatant self promotion for the companion fic i'm writing that takes place during chapter 6 during the Falling Camellia tour (AKA THE TACHIGIN LOVE STORY)
- Akutagawa's call is funny and also shows how much he's grown as he gives zero shits about Dazai and Chuuya being together
- Kyouka isn't here but she does get a final shout out for being sneaky
- Emily Dickinson: named after the renowned American poet.
- Elise is one of our last stops on our goodbye tour. i realized writing this chapter that she really is kind of a main character with an arc and plot relevance, and slapped her into the tags
- "You see," she concluded miserably, "when I can call like that to him across space--I belong to him. He doesn't love me--he never will--but I belong to him." — L.M. Montgomery, Emily's Quest
- did you really think *Life's Better With A Little Party In It* would reappear for the finale?
- there is really a place like that in SLC, and i personally have nothing against Utah!
- i've known for so long what the last line/scene was going to be. doesn't mean i wasn't terribly emotionally compromised about it



i really don't even know how to begin to say thank you to all or you. i could not have written this fic without the kind encouragement of so many people. you pushed me to challenge myself, and write something longer and deeper than i set out to. this was my first foray into this fandom, and i remember posting the first chapter with a shrug, thinking it'd be worth it if there were a couple people who enjoyed it. i could not have imagined the floods of support to come. i was able to become a better writer because of writing this story, and that is no small thing. so if you were here from the start, picked up along the way, brand new, or just skipped to the end to see what happened: i thank you, deeply and sincerely. in a year where things have often been pretty terrible, this story has been a source of real light in my life.

Elle

should i try to be classy and not end my last note begging for comments? nah, fuck that, TELL ME WHAT YOU THOUGHT DEAR READERS!!!

**PS I AM NO LONGER BEGGING FOR COMMENTS (IT'S ENOUGH SLICES)**

## End Notes

Titles Songs (Mayday Parade)

1. [Narrow](#)

of the infamous "i was screaming your name through the radio" lyric fame

2. [Call Me Hopeless But Not Romantic](#)

Chapter 5

3. [If You Can't Live Without Me, Why Aren't You Dead Yet?](#)

Chapter 6

4. [Three Cheers for Five Years](#)

Chapter 7

5. [If You Wanted A Song Written About You, All You Had To Do Was Ask](#)

Chapter 9

## Frequently Asked Quesitons

*Can I make fanart of this fic?*

Hell yeah, let me know when you're done and I'll link it up!!

*Can I translate this fic into a different language?*

Hell yeah, just make sure you credit me, and give me the link so I can add it to the page!!

*Can I try to turn the lyrics from this fic into an actual song?*

You are more than welcome to try, though I will warn you that everyone who has attempted to do so ultimately gave up lol. And I have some concrete ideas of how most of them sound if you want my input! But overall, hell yeah.

*Can I print a copy of this fic?*

I'm allowing people to print a **personal** copy, not multiples and never for sale. But if it's just for your own personal enjoyment, hell yeah.

*Are you writing a sequel?*

Nope!

Works inspired by this one

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!